Mussolini

Christopher Hibbert

ne's Illustrated History
Violent Century

BB

War leader
book No 13

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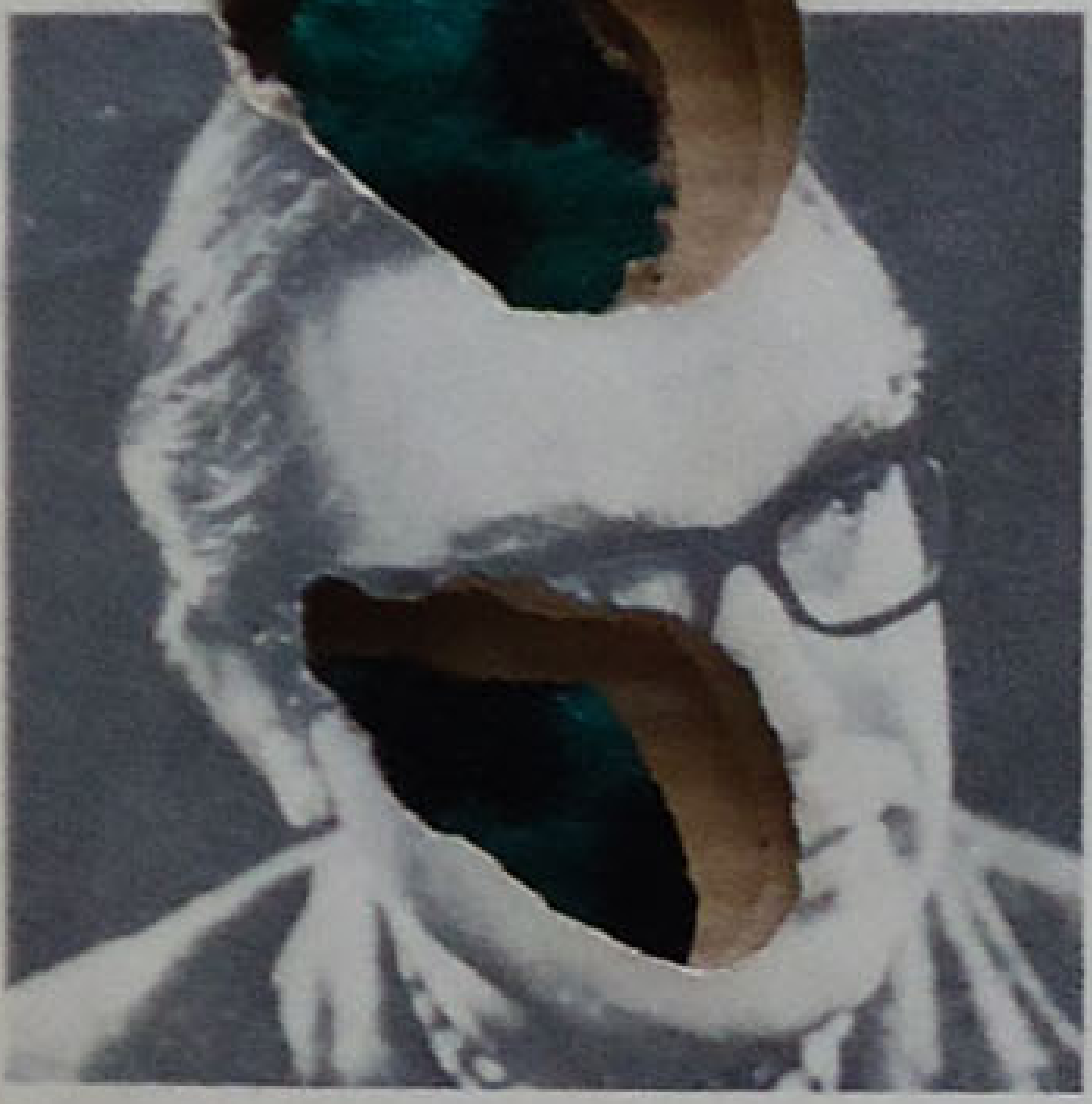

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Christopher Hibbert

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The Italian Tragedy

Introduction by David Mason

One of the most fascinating avenues of study presented by the Second World War lies in the assessment of the extraordinary figure of Benito Mussolini. What was the true nature of his contradictory character? What was the part he played in Italian history? How did he continue to exert a hold over the Italian people, against the apparent odds, for so long?

The circumstances of his boyhood and youth were such as have led to the rise of many a radical or revolutionary leader. The living was hard, on the inadequate earnings of his schoolmistress mother and blacksmith father, and at the same time the atmosphere was impregnated with revolutionary ideals. Mussolini's father wrote for socialist papers, and had been imprisoned for political activity. Mussolini himself, when he went away to school, suffered doubly from the rigours of harsh discipline, and from the denial of privileges which were available to wealthier
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relations with other people, especiall
women, were never mature: he ha
innumerable mistresses, but was
skilled romantic lover, preferring
technique based on violence, brevity
and contempt for his partners. In h
early work as a teacher and journali
he was bombastic, insensitive, u
thinking, and in many respects u
balanced. The trouble was that in t
early years after the First World W
these characteristics could only
popular. Disenchantment with t
settlement, in Italy as in German
was the ideal starting point for e
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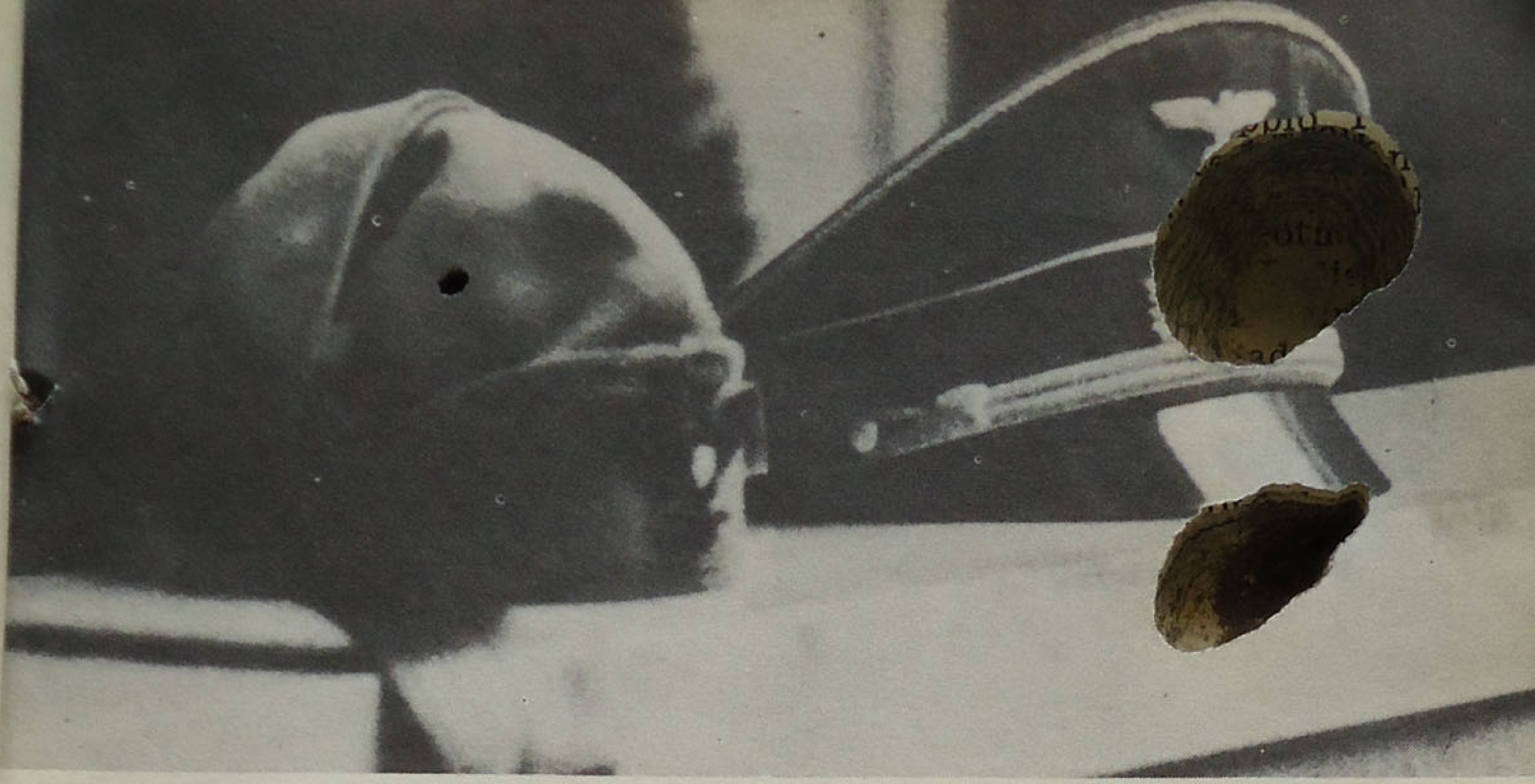


calm and prosperity to a newly united Italy. But in due course the latent evil in the system became apparent, and there followed the pattern of beatings, disappearance of opponents, abolition of political parties, and suppression of newspapers which is all too familiar in countries where the state is held in greater esteem than the individual. At the same time there was a parallel change in Mussolini's character, as he slid gradually into the megalomania of a petty dictator, and subsequently into the decline of his personality which in view of his own character deficiencies was inevitable.

Nothing in this development is in the least surprising. All that is truly surprising is that the Italian people should have tolerated their dangerous dictator for so long. It might be claimed that they were content with him so long as he held out to them by his alignment with Nazi Germany the promise of national greatness. But the more intelligent among them saw clearly that this could only lead to disaster, to an unhappy c[illegible] being on the losi[illegible] rmly under Hit[illegible] erged on the w[illegible] hen, did they put [illegible] did they allow the [illegible] nto a war which [illegible] Why did it take [illegible] ake the fateful s[illegible] ast it was taken, t[illegible] to be so wretchedly easy?

The answers to these questions must lie somewhere in the basic contradiction between the modern Italian character and the circumstances of their history. Despite some evident deficiencies, and an appalling shortage of national resources, the Italian people are undoubtedly among the most talented and successful of races, and are by nature warm-hearted, generous, and easy-going. Their history by contrast is a catalogue of trouble, turbulence, violence and invasion: the Roman Empire; gothic invasions; Charlemagne's empire; the confused Middle Ages; the Holy Roman Empire; the independent city states; the plundering of the country by a succession of Spanish, German, French and Austrian invaders; and finally unification only one hundred years ago.

With such a background it is perhaps hardly surprising that the Italian nation should have thrown up a leader of the dubious calib[illegible] character of Mussolini, and [illegible] uld have [illegible] left free [illegible] sastrous [illegible] nwar[illegible] s prob- [illegible] be th[illegible] heir an- [illegible] haracter- [illegible] own by their oman for[illegible] hich might ha[illegible] em to greatness – the capa[illegible] of [illegible] und government.

Man of the people

Mussolini, impassioned orator

One day,' Mussolini told his mother when he was a boy, 'I shall make the whole earth tremble.' It was an ambition that obsessed him throughout his life. From his earliest days, he once confessed, he believed that he had been born into the world to shake [illegible] astonish it; the very moment of his birth seemed to him propitious.

'I was born on 29th July 1883,' he wrote in the earliest version of his autobiography which he composed in prison when he was twenty-eight, 'at Varnano dei Costa, an old hamlet on the top of a hill at Dovia, which is near the village of Predappio. I was born at two in the aft[illegible] a Sunday. The sun had ju[illegible] the constellation of Leo . . .

His father was a bla[illegible] his mother a schoolmistre[illegible] mother was a quiet and gentle woman whose pittance of fifty lire a month largely supported the family in their humble way of life, for much of [illegible] the father earned was sp[illegible]n his mistress. Alessandro M[illegible] was a wayward, obstinate, s[illegible] man who had never been to school; but he was neither uneducated nor unintelligent.

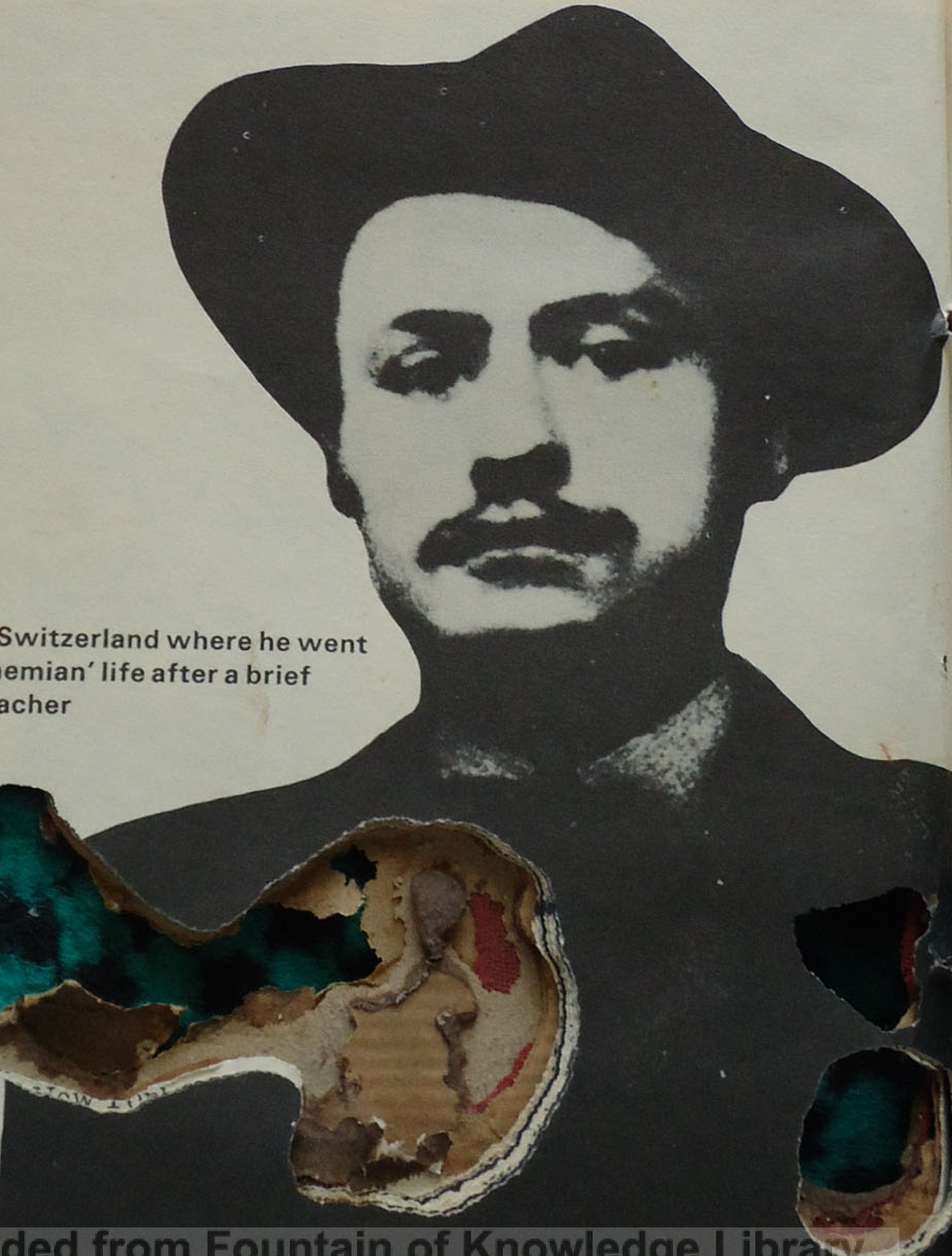
Benito Mussolini as a baby with his mother, a former schoolmistress

Alessandro Mussolini, father of Benito. He was reputedly obstinate and selfish

He wrote articles for several Socialist jou[illegible] for the republican newspa[illegible] *[illegible]ro Romangnolo*, and he ta[illegible] on end about politics and [illegible] expatiating upon the revolu[illegible] beliefs for which he, like his father before him, had been in prison. He christened his elder son Benito (after the Mexican revolutiona[illegible]enito Juarez), Amilcare (after [illegible]agnol anarchist, Amilcare C[illegible] and Andrea (after Andrea Co[illegible] one of the founders of the Italian Socialist Party). The names seemed appropriate ones for the self-willed, difficult, disobedient child that Benito soon proved to be.

Despite his quarrelsome ill temper, he was happy as a child, loved by h younger brother and sister, admir by his school fellows, well cared f by his devoted, long-suffering moth

When he was nine it was decid that he should be sent away from th local school whose teachers foun him uncontrollable, where he cra under the desks to pinch the bare le of the other children, and that h should be submitted to the rig discipline of a boarding school ke by the Salesian Fathers at Faenz But the Salesians could not contr him either; he fought the other bo and even fought the masters when th tried to beat him. After throwing a inkwell at one of the Fathers a



Mussolini in Switzerland where he went to lead a 'Bohemian' life after a brief career as a teacher stabbing one of the pupils with a penknife, he was expelled, and sent to Giosuè Carducci school at Forlimpopoli where he stabbed another boy with his penknife and was again expelled.

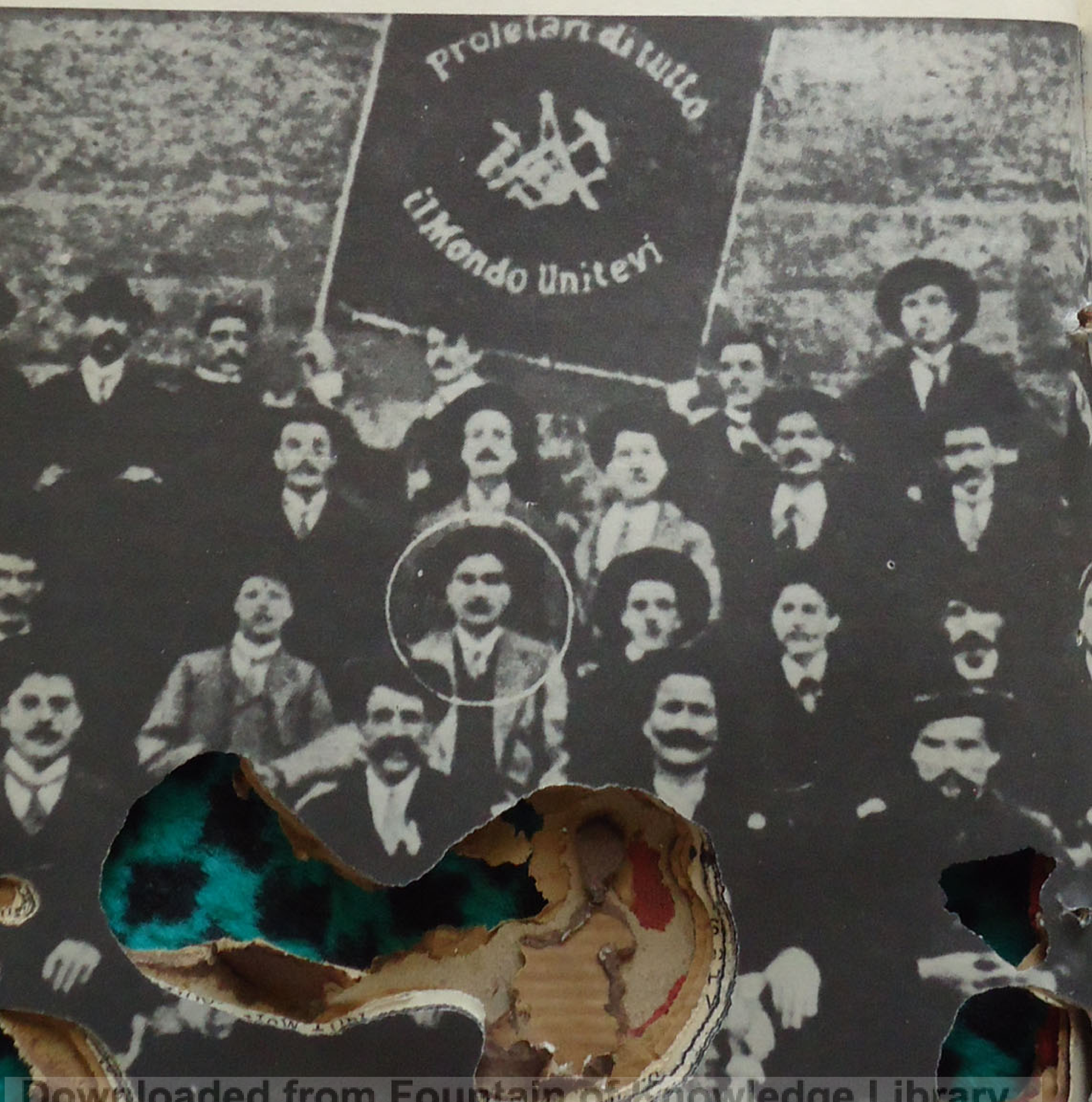
Impatient of all restraints, he nevertheless worked hard at those subjects that interested him, and was recognised as a boy of exceptional intelligence. After being re-admitted to the Forlimpopoli school as a day pupil, he passed all his examinations and obtained a teaching diploma.

By the time he was eighteen and had obtained his first teaching appointment, he was a young man of striking appearance and character. He was short and very pale with a powerful jaw, and imr[illegible] dark, piercing eyes. His vo[illegible]t, an English admirer was [illegible]ribe as the most beauti[illegible]ever heard, was deep and s[illegible] He was restless, impatient, vi[illegible] and ambitious. He was also, a woman who knew him in those days recalled, 'excessively blasphemous, aggressively ill-dressed, ne[illegible]nd excitable'. It was cle[illegible] he was wholly ill-suited to [illegible]eer in the schoolroom; and after four months of teaching he had had enough and went to Switzerland with nothing in his pockets, so he said, but a medallion of Karl Marx.

Mussolini at fourteen. At school he was recognised as a boy of exceptional intelligence

'I was a Bohemian in those days,' he r[illegible]roudly. 'I made my own rul[illegible] not keep even them.' In [illegible]agment of autobiograp[illegible] was excluded from later, [illegible]d versions, he wrote of these wild, youthful days of his with a kind of exultation, revealing that passion for self-dramatisation which [illegible]ever to leave him. According to [illegible] account he worked in Switzer[illegible] a labourer and in a butcher's [illegible] as a mason's mate and an errand boy. He was arrested for begging, and one day attacked two English ladies sitting with a picnic on a bench in Geneva. 'I threw myself on one of the old witches,' he said, 'and grabbed the food from her hands. If they had made the slightest resistance I would have strangled them both – strangled them, mi[illegible] you.' He took great pride in treating women with violence; he was delighted to remember that as a schoolboy at Forlimpopoli he had fallen on the flaccid body of whores in the local brothel, that he had raped the first girl he had wanted who was not a prostitute, that he had bullied and mauled his first mistress, done what he liked to her, stabbed her with that

Benito (ringed) poses with a revolutionary group during his time in Switzerland


Proletari di tutto il Mondo Unitevi

well-used penknife, driving the blade deep into the flesh of her thigh. From a subsequent mistress he contracted syphilis and threatened to shoot himself, but was persuaded to consult a doctor instead.

In Switzerland he joined various revolutionary groups and declaimed against the political systems of Europe with passionate intensity. He read a great deal, hurriedly and haphazardly, casting one book aside to throw himself into another, forming no coherent philosophy but expressing views, as a woman he met in Geneva said, which 'were always the reflection of the book he had happened to read last'. He called himself '*un apostolato di violenza*'; and it is significant that although he seems to have read Kropotkin and Marx, Nietzsche and Sorel, Kant and Fichte, Blanqui and Kautsky, the only book he mentioned in his autobiography is Gustave Lebon's *The Psychology of the Crowd*. He began to write for various revolutionary papers, but the views to which he gave vent in writing were, like his speeches and orations, contradictory and erratic, expressive of a kind of anti-clerical, anarchistic socialism which was little more than a plea for a day of vengeance.

One night in the summer of 1903, he was arrested in Berne for advocating violence as a means of enforcing the workers' demands and thrown into prison. He returned to Italy the next year preceded by a well-established reputation for political extremism.

He was soon in prison again, and, upon his release, the reputation of 'Comrade Mussolini' had spread beyond the confines of the [illegible] He was a skilful journalist [illegible] an [illegible]r, and his artic[illegible] in [illegible] variety of Soci[illegible] fr[illegible] *Il Popolo* to *L'*[illegible] *Laboratore*. After his ma[illegible] [illegible] daughter of [illegible] mistress, Rac[illegible] [illegible]d a newspaper [illegible] *Classe – The Class*[illegible] all four pages of which he wrote himself. So successful was t[illegible] that in 1912 the Executiv[illegible] of the Socialist Party [illegible]Mussolini editor of *Ava*[illegible]ficial Socialist newspaper. [illegible] a few months his great gifts as editor and as writer of the political articles, combined with his original typographical ideas, had [illegible]d its circulation.

While developing a[illegible]y skilful journalist, he was a[illegible] making his mark as an orator with a uniquely brilliant style. His attitudes were theatrical, his opinions contradictory, his facts frequently wrong, his attacks often malicious and misdirected; but his voice was one of compelling fascination, his vigorous, repetitive gestures were extraordinarily effective, his phrases dramatic, his metaphors both apt and striking. Moreover, he was a master in building up a series of short and arresting sentences, delivered in staccato bursts, into a climactic whole. Above all he had a remarkable facility for imposing a mood upon an audience and then abandoning himself to it until his speech became almost a dialogue, with his listeners shouting their agreement in phrases which he would repeat and reinterpret.

In recognition of his skill as an orator he was nominated as Forli's representative at the Socialist National Congress; and in October 1913 he stood in the elections as Socialist candidate for Forli. His platform was anti-militarist, anti-nationalist, anti-clericalist and anti-imperialist; and he was heavily defeated. More ant[illegible]itarist than [illegible]ver after this def[illegible]tinued to [illegible] speeches[illegible]tion of [illegible]ism [illegible]ia de-[illegible] Gre[illegible] [illegible] *Avanti*. [illegible]as 'Down [illegible] arms, and [illegible] with hu[illegible] Soon, however, he had chan[illegible] of [illegible]d. Swayed by Karl Marx's a[illegible] that social revolution usually follows war, [illegible]uaded that 'the defeat of [illegible]d be a death-blow to libe[illegible]pe', he gave up his edit[illegible]nti! and, financed by Filippo [illegible], a publisher who favoured intervention, he began *Il Popolo d'Italia*. On either side of the title of the first issue, which called unequ[illegible]lly for war, were two maxims [illegible] might well have been interpre[illegible] the birth-cries of Fascism – '*C[illegible]a del ferro ha del pane*' ('who has iron has bread') from Blanqui, and '*La rivoluzione è un' idea che ha trovato delle baionette*' ('revolution is an idea which has found bayonets') from Napoleon.

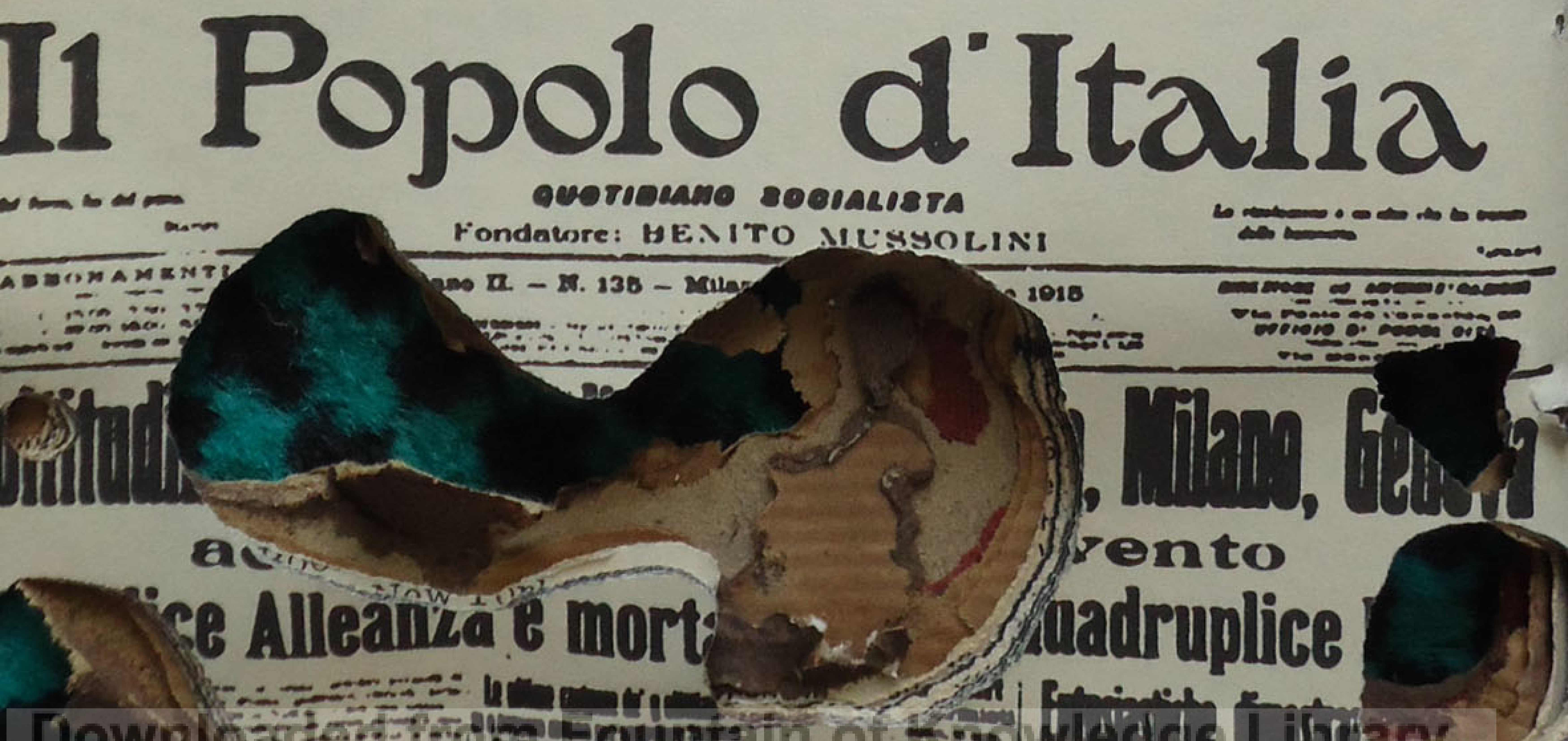
At an angry meeting of the Socialist Party in Milan, Mussolini was expelled amidst shouts of '*Traditore! Venduto! Sicario!*' And although he passionately responded, 'You cannot get rid of me because I am, and always will be a Socialist!' his retreat from the Party was complete.

'From today onwards,' he wrote in *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 'We are all Italians and nothing but Italians. Now that steel has met steel, one single cry comes from our hearts – *Viva l'Italia!*'

Mussolini went to the war himself, fought with the Bersaglieri and was wounded. He returned to Italy a convinced anti-Socialist, though still anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist. As early as February 1918 he was advocating the emergence of a dictator, 'a man who is ruthless and intelligent enough to make a clean sweep'; and the following year in Milan at a meeting of about two hundred discontented Socialists and syndicalists, republicans, anarchists, unclassifiable revolutionaries and restless, discharged soldiers, there was formed a new force in national politics which thrust that dictator forward.

Mussolini called this force a *Fascio di Combattimento*, a group of fighters. These fighters were to be bound together by ties as close as those which secured the *fascinae* of the lictors, the symbols of Roman authority. So Fascism was created; and its symbol devised.

Wearing the black shirts which the labourers of the Romagna had adopted as the uniform of the anarchists, carrying the skull-embroidered flags of the *Arditi* (the commandos of the army), singing patriotic songs and shouting nationalist slogans, the Fascist *Squadristi* marched to the attack against Socialists and Communists alike, gathering more and more recruits to their ranks, provoking and intensifying the anarchic situation in Italy which would make the people willing to accept the authoritarianism which Mussolini preached as a cure for the nation's ills.



Il Popolo d'Italia

QUOTIDIANO SOCIALISTA

Fondatore: BENITO MUSSOLINI

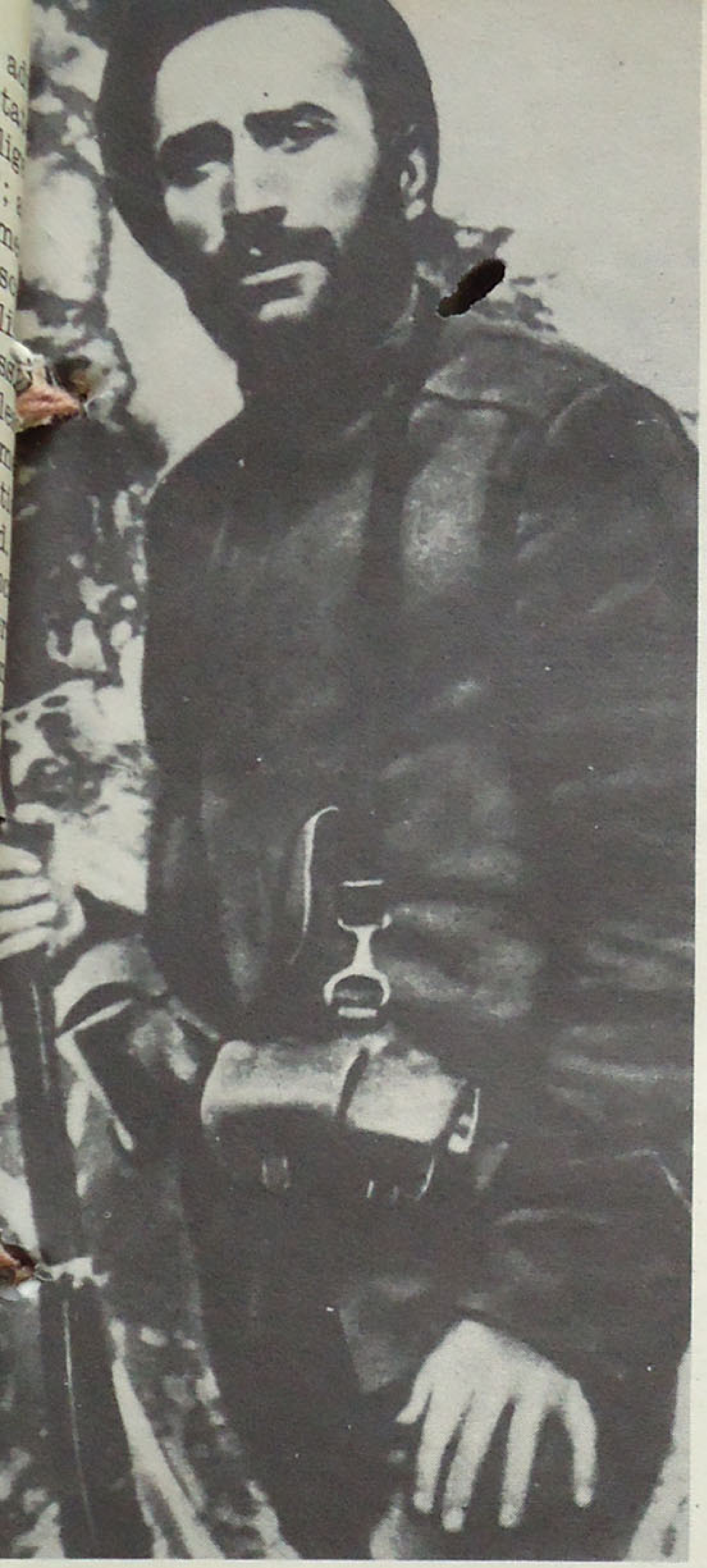
Anno II. – N. 135 – Mila[illegible] 1915

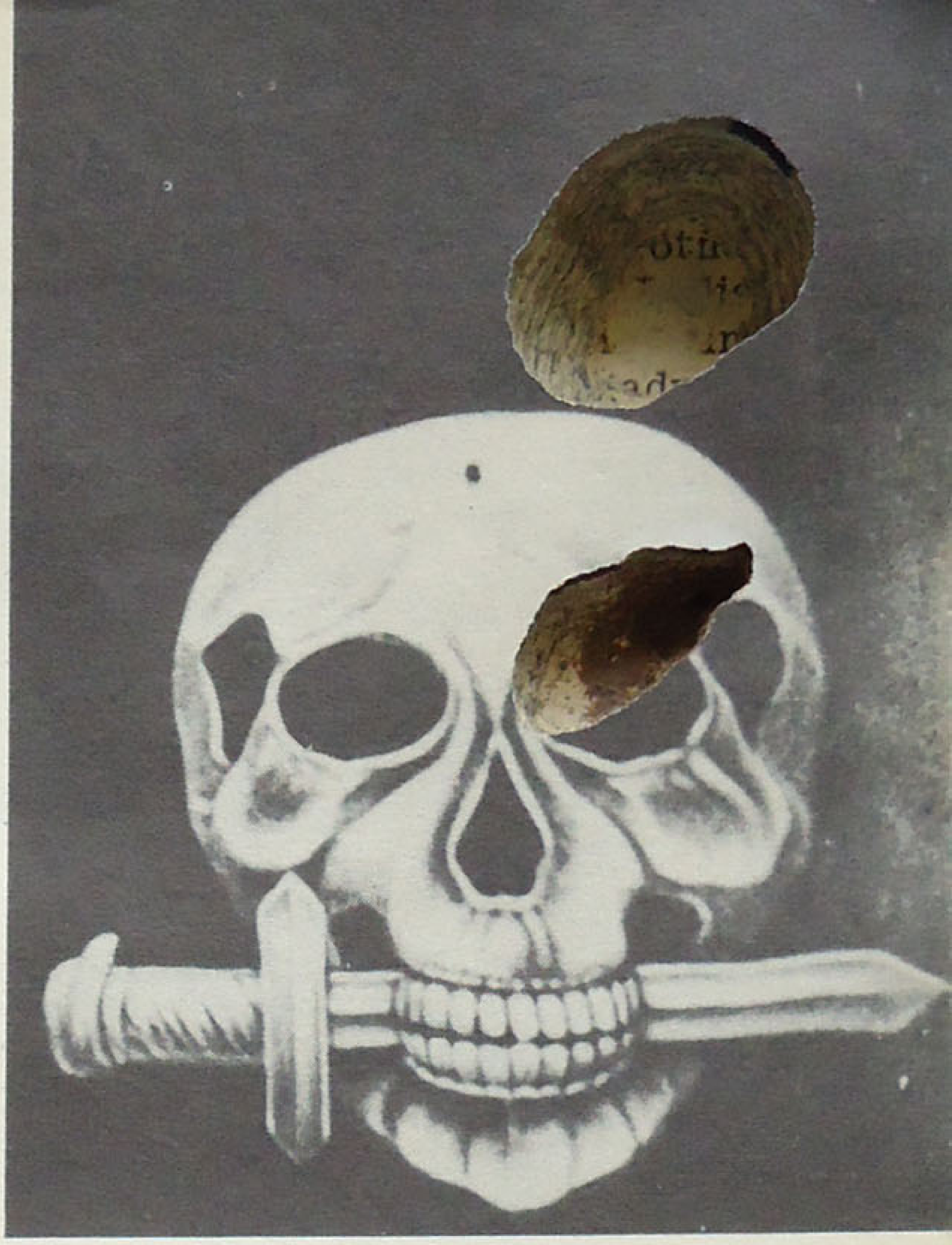
Milano, Genova

vento

Alleanza è mort

Quadruplice





Far left : ,An edition of *Il Popolo d'Italia,* the paper founded by Mussolini. The appearance of this paper marked Mussolini's renunciation of his belief in pacifism. *Left :* Mussolini in the uniform of a Bersaglieri during the First World War. *Above :* The skull, the emblem of Fascism. *Below :* Fascist *Squadristi* burn the literature of their enemies – socialists and communists

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GERMANY
CZECHOSLOVAKIA
AUSTRIA
HUNGARY
SWITZERLAND
BRENNER PASS
Alps
FRANCE
Milan
Verona
Venice
Trieste
Cremona
Turin
Po
Parma
Ferrara
Pola
YUGOSLAVIA
Genoa
Spezia
Bologna
Forli
Predappio
Apennines
LIGURIAN SEA
Florence
Leghorn
Arno
Ancona
ADRIATIC SEA
Siena
Perugia
ITALY
CORSICA
Tiber
ROME
Bari
Brindisi
Naples
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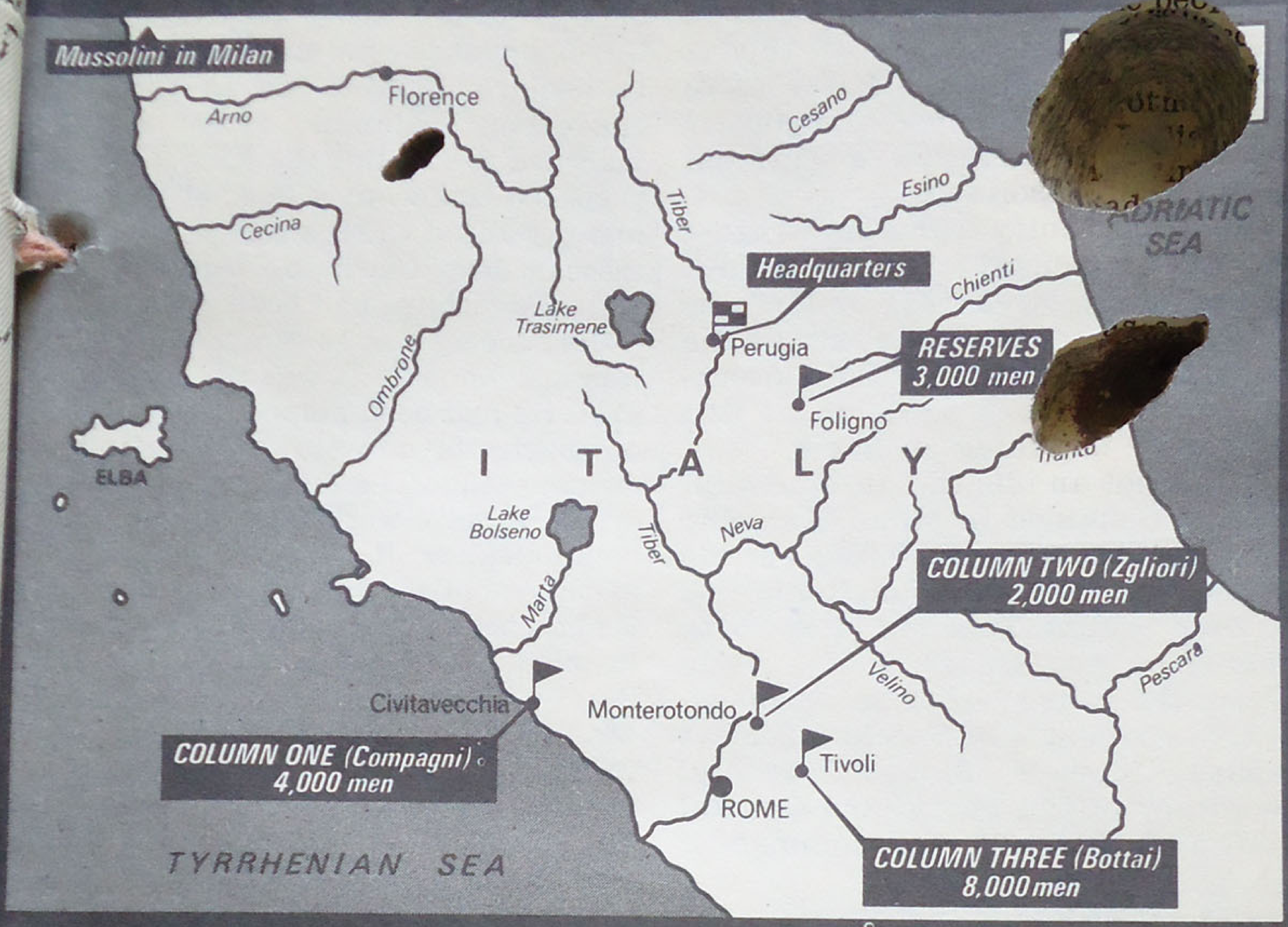
i's Italy, basis for a new Roma


Mussolini in Milan
Florence
Arno
Cecina
Ombrone
ELBA
Tiber
Cesano
Esino
ADRIATIC SEA
Headquarters
Chienti
Lake Trasimene
Perugia
RESERVES 3,000 men
Foligno
I T A L Y
Lake Bolseno
Marta
Tiber
Neva
COLUMN TWO (Zgliori) 2,000 men
Velino
Pescara
Civitavecchia
Monterotondo
Tivoli
ROME
COLUMN ONE (Compagni) 4,000 men
COLUMN THREE (Bottai) 8,000 men
TYRRHENIAN SEA

Dispositions for the March on Rome 1922

In th[illegible]tions of 1921 the Fascists had[illegible]h ground that thirty-five[illegible] of their Party were ele[illegible]Chamber of Deputies and [illegible]se, now a national figure, w[illegible]ssolini.

His opportunity came in August 1922 when a general strike was called. Mussolini declared that unless the Gover[illegible] prevented the strike the Fascists[illegible] 'Either the Government wil[illegible]ven to us or we will seize it by m[illegible]ching on Rome.'

It was not an idle threat. Mussolini himself remained in Milan, awaiting his summons from the King; but his supporters *did* march on Rome, led by four leading Fascists later to be known as the *Quadrumviri* – Italo Balbo, the young leader of the *Squadristi*, Cesare Maria De Vecchi, a Fascist deputy, Michele Bianchi, General Secretary of the Party, and General Emilio De Bono, a former commander of the Italian army IX Corps. Th Government proclaimed its intentio to declare martial law as the fou converging columns, 25,000 strong marched sou[illegible] But the King, already prepared to accept a Fascist Government, refused to sign the decree; a instead despatched the telegram fo which Mussolini had been waiting.

His success was as remarkable as it was sudden. But it was not inexplicable. He had been helped by an extraordinarily favourable combination of circumstances, including an economic crisis, a split working-class and the complaisance, if not the complicity, of the middle-class political parties. He had been helped, too, by a wonderful physical presence not yet devitalized by illness, by that superb style of oratory, staccato, tautophonic and responsive, not yet ridiculed by caricature, and by a persuasive charm not yet atrophied by adulation. But there was more to his success than this. Whether by native instinct or by shrewd calculation, he had shown himself a superb opportunist, a highly flexible *agitatore*, and a master in the political art of dividing enemies by

The 'March on Rome' – a show of strength which gave Mussolini the power he wanted. With Benito are Emilio de Bono, Starace, de Vecchi and Italo Balbo

insinuating wedges between them.

Once in power, as the youngest prime minister the Italians had ever had, he showed symptoms of becoming a statesman of the f[illegible]t rank. He presented to the King a list of ministers calculated to demonstrate that [illegible] was a national rather than a party leader. And it was as a national leader that the Italians were prepared, indeed anxious, to welcome him. They were tired of strikes and riots, hungry for the flamboyant, choreographic techniques, the mediaeval trappings of Fascism with which D'Annunzio had excited the crowds in Fiume. Thus it was that Mussolini's popularity survived both the sporadic violence of the undoubtedly fraudulent 1924 elections and the murder of the brave and gifted Socialist leader, Giacomo Matteotti, a murder in which Mussolini was widely believed to be implicated.

Skilfully presented to the people as Italy's man of destiny, h[illegible]ccepted as such; and it [illegible]nly Italians who fell und[illegible] of that proudly jutting [illegible]ack wide-open eyes, tho[illegible]erfully expressive gestures, that strangely emotive voice. He was compared without a hint of irony to Napoleon and to Cromwell, hailed as a genius and as a superman by [illegible] figures all over Europe and i[illegible]ica. Had he not reinvigorat[illegible]is divided and demoralised country? Had he not succeeded where even Cavour had failed and reconciled it with the Papacy? Had he not carried out social reforms and public works without jeopardising the interests or losing the support of the industrialists and landowners? Who else could have achieved all this? And the answer was returned to that vast Olympian face on the balcony of Palazzo Venezia: no one but *Il Duce*. *Duce! Duce! Duce!* the Duce who – as the Italians were assured by the words scrawled across buildings all over Italy – '*ha sempre ragione*', 'is always right'.

He was undoubtedly more popular

[illegible]areer [illegible] gifted socialist [illegible]der. Mussolini was strongly [illegible]plicated in his murder

in Italy than anybody had ever been before, despite his sure destruction of civil liberties. His pictures were cut out of newspapers and magazines and pasted on the w[illegible]s of poor peasant cottages, at the side of the Madonna. 'School girls fell in love with him,' the Italian journalist, Luigi Barzini has written, 'as with a film star. His more memorable words were written large on village houses for all to read . . . I remember him, one day, during military manoeuvres in the Langhe, in 1932, walking through a vast bare plain of yellow stubble surrounded by distant green hills, trees, and the steeples of village churches. Peasants came running from all sides, red-faced [illegible]nting, to see him, touch him[illegible] him. One of his secretar[illegible] him with a leather en[illegible] exact size of thousand-l[illegible] hand bank-notes to the [illegible] miserable with the gesture of a gambler dealing out cards. Soon enough Mussolini was leading a parade of thousands of frenzied and gesticulating [illegible]ers. He showed no expressio[illegible]s face except the usual wood[illegible]ermination . . . Nobody who saw [illegible] will ever forget the sight of city squares filled with crowds listening to him; the heads were as close together as tesserae in a mosaic, all eyes turned to one focal point, the balcony or stand from which he was speaking. It was an ominous and frightening sight.'

Left: **Mussolini speaks in his own defence after the murder of Matteotti**
Below: **1935. Mussolini inspects his troops before their departure for Abyssinia**

Another distinguished Italian writer, Alberto Moravia has observed, 'If Mussolini had had a foreign policy as clever as his domestic one perhaps he'd be Duce today.' It is an opinion that deserves consideration. Certainly it was Mussolini's wild arrogance, callous xenophobia and wilful misapprehension of Italy's fundamental necessities that led to his invasion of Abyssinia and, thereafter, inevitably to his downfall.

That this downfall was of his own making Mussolini could never admit; for he had long since come to believe in his own propaganda and allowed himself to be convinced of his own infallibility. 'On my grave I want this epitaph,' he once said with that staggering lack of both humour and restraint that characterises the apocalyptic pronouncements of megalomaniacs: ' "Here lies one of the most intelligent animals [illegible] to appear on the surface of th[illegible]' "

[illegible] fact, Mu[illegible] his great [illegible] was [illegible]ful, con- [illegible] pa[illegible] [illegible]ncealing [illegible]d a bom- [illegible]hase of his career [illegible] resolution [illegible] manifest than in the early da[illegible] Second World War.

T[illegible] arms

Mussolini on the steps of the Palazzo Venezia reviewing his troops

On the day that the German armies opened their onslaught upon Poland, Count Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law and Foreign Secretary, called at the Palazzo Venezia in Rome. He found the Duce sitting at his desk in the corner of his vast, bare room, calm and composed. He had made up his mind about the war, he told Ciano: he would remain neutral; Italy would not intervene.

Ciano was profoundly relieved. For weeks he had been urging Mussolini to stay out of the coming war. The Pact of Steel which had been signed in Hitler's Chancellery the previous May had given firm expression to that alliance between Germany and Italy known as the Rome-Berlin axis. Article III of the Pact had provided that 'if, contrary to the wishes and hopes of the contracting parties, it should happen that one of them is involved in hostilities with another power or powers, the other contracting party will come immediately to its side as ally and support it with all its military forces on land, sea and in the air'. But Ciano had been assured by the German Foreign Minister, Ribbentrop, that nothing would be done to provoke hostilities: Germany needed a long period of peace. Mussolini, for his part, had been satisfied that Hitler would make no decisive move without consulting him.

Since then, however, the Italians had been forced to recognise that Hitler's plans for an aggressive war were far further advanced than they had been led to suppose and that he had no intention of letting Rome know in advance what they were. Goebbels had once warned him, 'All Italians chatter like gypsie[illegible] Hitler believed this to be tr[illegible] very day after the Pact of [illegible] been signed, the Führer h[illegible] his study, 'Our aim m[illegible] hidden from Italy.' And [illegible] r[illegible]den. To Ciano's i[illegible] [illegible]s had been told [illegible]tions that led to [illegible]-aggression pa[illegible] agreement in principle had already been reached. When at l[illegible]ad learned of this pact o[illegible]o Germany, Ciano had ret[illegible]e 'completely disgusted [illegible]er-mans, with their Führ[illegible] their way of doing things'. They had betrayed him and had lied to him; they were trying to drag Italy into an adventure which she did n[illegible]ant and which might even [illegible] the Fascist régime: the [illegible] with Germany had never be[illegible]popular in Italy, but now that Hitler had come to terms with Stalin in order to secure the defeat of Catholic Poland, it would be detested.

Immediately upon his return to Rome, Ciano had gone to Mussolini to report to him what he had learned in Berlin of the Nazis' methods and intentions. 'They are traitors,' he had said bluntly. 'We must have no scruples in ditching them.' He was certain that the Germans would have no scruples in ditching the Italians, and that, however highly Hitler regarded Mussolini personally, he had no respect at all for the Italian army. There would be no need to ask Italy for any help 'according to the existing obligations' of the Pact of Steel, Hitler had told Ciano dismissively. 'After the conquest of Poland (which would not take long) Germany would be in a position to assemble for a general conflict a hundred divisions on the West Wall'.

'For the Germans,' Ciano had commented bitterly, 'an alliance with Italy means only that the enemy will be obliged to keep a certain number of divisions facing us, thus easing the situation on the Germa[illegible]r fronts . . . [illegible] fate that might [illegible] does not [illegible] them in t[illegible] [illegible]ini's [illegible] the [illegible] He [illegible] atti-[illegible] Italy, [illegible]re their [illegible]r and [illegible]mes he spoke [illegible]ively of them as 'mere sold[illegible] [illegible]eal warriors. Give them [illegible]

Viva l'Asse Roma-Berlino
Es lebe die Achse Rom Berlin

Right : Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law, emulates the Mussolini posture. *Above :* Support for the political reality that induced Italy to side with Germany in the event of war – the Rome-Berlin axis. *Below :* Side by side after the signing of the 'Pact of Steel', Hitler and Mussolini

KEY
Territories … ian rule
1911
Dates … rol was …
Inte…
U.S.S.R.
HUNGARY
RUMANIA
YUGOSLAVI…
AL…NIA
BULGARIA
ITALY
Rome
SARDINIA
SICILY
1939
GREECE
BLACK SEA
Ankara
TURKEY
TUNISIA
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
Tripoli
SYRIA
Baghdad
…ERSIA
IRAQ
JORDAN
Cairo
PERSIAN GULF
LIBYA
1911
EGYPT
RED SEA
SAUDI ARABIA
FRENCH WEST AFRICA
ANGLO-
Khartoum
EGYPTIAN
SUDAN
Massawa
ERITREA 1889
NIGERIA
FRENCH EQUATORIAL AFRICA
Addis Ababa
ABYSSINIA
1935
ITALIAN SOMALILAND 1925
Mogadishu
UGANDA
KENYA
BELGIAN CONGO
500
…res
800

lonial empire

sausage, butter, beer and a little car and t[illegible]on't bother about sticking th[illegible]s into people.' But more fr[illegible] spoke of their 'fine ma[illegible] their 'heroic philosoph[illegible]sting their hardness with th[illegible]ness of his own weak countrymen.

At least, for the moment, he had agreed with Ciano that the Germans must[illegible]allowed to drag Italy into war. Bo[illegible]e might that 'whenever Germany[illegible]it necessary to mobilize at midnight, we shall mobilize at five to twelve', he had recognized that Italy must on no account be associated with Germany's design to set a match to the European powder-keg. The recently-acquired Italian possessions in north Africa and Abyssinia needed peace for their stability, as did Albania which Italy had annexed in 1939; in Italy itself peace was equally needed to move factories, plant and machinery to the impoverished south from the congested industrial centres of the north, and to improve the holdings of foreign currency by a splendidly ambitious international exhibition to be held in Rome in 1942 to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Fascist seizure of power by their March on Rome.

Time would be needed, too, to repatriate the million or so Italians in France and, above all, to bring the Armed Forces up to strength, their equipment up to date, and their officers to a higher state of efficiency. 'At our meetings,' the Duce wrote plaintively to Hitler, 'the war was envisaged for after 1942, when I would have been ready on land, sea and in the air, according to our agreed plans.'

But although he recognised that peace was essential for the well-being of Italy, that a long war might well prove disastrous, that he must not 'march blindly with the Germans', he was beset by fears that they 'might

Germany, the aggressor. View from inside a German bomber over Poland

do good business cheaply'. Ciano recorded that during one of the long, inconclusive discussions he had with him at the Palazzo Venezia, Mussolini at first agreed that It[illegible] must not go to war, 'then he said that honour compelled him to march with Germany. Finally he said that he wanted his part of the booty.'

As a means of satisfying his honour without committing himself to war, Ciano had suggested that Mussolini should inform Hitler that Italy's support would have to be limited to 'political and economic assistance' unless Germany were immediately to make available large supplies of equipment and raw materials. If the list were made to look sufficiently formidable, Germany would be obliged to regret that she could not meet it. Thus Italy would be given an excuse for remaining neutral for the moment, and honour would be satisfied. On the advice of Mackensen, the German Ambassador in Rome, who was as anxious to avoid war as Ciano, the list was an enormous o[illegible]ailing Italy's urgent need [illegible]lion tons of coal, two milli[illegible]eel, one million tons of t[illegible]l as 17,000 military vehic[illegible] anti-aircraft batteries. As [illegible] had said, it was 'enough to kill a bull'; and it was obviously impossible for the Germans to supply even half the amounts demanded. When did [illegible]talians need all this mater[illegible]bbentrop had asked the Italia[illegible]assador in Rome. 'At once,' Attolico had replied, determined to make the demands even more unacceptable, 'before hostilities begin.'

Hitler had not expected this. He had, as he had protested earlier, no need for any Italian divisions to take the field; but he had hoped at least that they would mobilize, march to the frontier and make a few threatening gestures in the direction of France. Temporarily he had lost his nerve. Mussolini's evident reluctance to support him, combined with the news of an Anglo-Polish Pact of Mutual Assistance, which had reached him on the same day as the Italian demands, had persuaded him to postpone the time fixed for the invasion. But it had not been postponed for long. He had soon cast all doubts aside. At a quarter to five on the morning of 1st September, the attack on Poland had begun.

Although Mussolini, later that day, reiterated his decision to keep out of the war, he was quite incapable of viewing the immediate and brilliant successes of the German *Blitzkrieg* with the dispassionate calm of a neutral observer. Indeed, he would not allow that Ita[illegible]s neutral at [illegible] she was 'no[illegible]t'. He in-[illegible]d the [illegible] Council [illegible]e being [illegible]out t[illegible]ation of [illegible]as a mere [illegible] were not at [illegible]ake, whe[illegible]'s interests [illegible]osely bound up with this w[illegible]t the case that there is [illegible] be said [illegible],' he declared. 'We reserve the [illegible] our word at the right mo[illegible] own language and in our [illegible] Meanwhile we watch with [illegible] and mature our delibera[illegible]

Far from watching with cold calm, Mussolini observed the progress of the war with increasing and almost franti[illegible]iety, exhausting and exasperati[illegible]o and his other Ministers with [illegible]rades and tergivisations. Scarce[illegible] week passed without his changing his mind as to what action he should take.

Despite all the obvious advantages of Italian neutrality – the foreign markets captured from Germany, particularly in the Balkans, the soaring exports and stock-market quotations – Mussolini was far more interested in Germany's military triumphs than in Italy's economic progress. One day he would talk of making a public declaration of Italian neutrality, but the next there would come what Ciano described as one of his 'belligerent flashes' and he would show how much the idea of joining the Germans attracted him. Then he would give way to despondency over the state of the armed forces.

At the beginning of October he was deriding Hitler's confidence in victory, insisting that the French and English would hold firm. 'He is somewhat bitter about Hitler's sudden rise to fame,' Ciano concluded. 'He would be greatly pleased if Hitler were slowed down, and, hoping this, predicts that it will come about.' Yet soon afterwards he was asserting with angry confidence, 'There are still some criminals an[illegible]eciles who believe that Germ[illegible]e beaten. I [illegible] you Ger[illegible] . . . En[illegible] will be[illegible] [illegible]is is [illegible] get it in[illegible] he said i[illegible] to keep ou[illegible] [illegible] impossible [illegible]gerous n[illegible] [illegible] it on Germany's side. T[illegible] [illegible]man Pact makes Germa[illegible]

unbeatable by any other Power or coalition. Nobody,' he kept repeating, 'Nobody loves a neutral.'

After Hitler's capture of Warsaw and Ribbentrop's meeting with Stalin at the Kremlin, where it was decided that Germany and Russia should [illegible]oland between them, Mus[illegible] [illegible] way out of his dilemma [illegible] a negotiated settlement [illegible]many and the Western [illegible]hich he himself would [illegible]ent part. He would thus [illegible] a war which Ital[illegible] [illegible] to fight but als[illegible] [illegible] he had lost in [illegible] [illegible]alian people w[illegible] [illegible] the Fascist Gove[illegible]

Stalin shakes hands with Ribbentrop. After Hitler's capture of Wa[illegible]as decided that Germany and [illegible] should divide Poland bet[illegible]

standing by while Poland, for the defence of which thousands of Italians had volunteered to fight, was torn in half by two heathen states. Hitler's rejection of his overtures increased Mussolini's resentment and jealousy to such an extent that he again talked hopefully of a German defeat, and allowed Ciano to make a sp[illegible] the Chamber of Deputies [illegible] Germany's conduct was st[illegible] demned. The speech was [illegible] a letter from Mussolini [illegible] more forceful terms than [illegible] be[illegible]ed in addressing [illegible]eding that tact[illegible] made the avo[illegible]nt vital, 'esp[illegible]

Ribbentrop's forecast [illegible] non-intervention of Britain [illegible] France' had not been fulfilled, Mussolini continued, 'I who was born a revolutionary and have not modified my revolutionary mentality [illegible] that you cannot permanentl[illegible]ice the principles of *your* rev[illegible]n to the tactical requirements of a given moment . . . I must also add that any further step in your relations with Moscow would have catastrophic repercussions in Italy, where the unanimity of anti-Bolshevik feeling is absolute, granite-hard and unbreakable . . . Permit me to think that this will not happen.'

Having delivered himself of this rebuke, however, Mussolini's attitude towards Germany and the war began to change once more. Soon after his letter to Hitler was written he was making speeches in which he referred to 'the fight that is bound to come' and declaring that no one should suppose that Italy's deficiencies in military supplies could constitute an alibi. Anyone courageous enough to urge caution was dismissed as a poltroon. When he heard that the King had compared the Germans unfavourably with the British and had spoken against joining the fight until it was merely a case of 'gathering up the broken dishes', he burst out furiously, 'Why doesn't the stupid little sardine stick to collecting coins. That's the only thing he understands.' As soon as the war was over [illegible] would 'tell Hitle[illegible] away with [illegible]se absurd [illegible]s in the [illegible]monar[illegible] He w[illegible] the co[illegible] more [illegible] Cian[illegible] March. [illegible] the only [illegible] really values [illegible] desires – [illegible] the cause of [illegible] month later, when the G[illegible] had enjoyed further military successes in N[illegible] the Duce was 'more warli[illegible]e pro-German than ever'; a[illegible]e of the German attack up[illegible]e was obsessed by the fear [illegible]r was about to win the war single-handed. 'Some months ago I said that the Allies had lost the victory,' he told Ciano. 'Today I tell you that they have lost the war. We [illegible] are sufficiently dishonour[illegible] delay is inconceivable. We have [illegible] time to lose. Within a month I shall declare war. I shall attack France and Great Britain in the air and on the sea. I am no longer thinking of taking up arms against Yugoslavia because it would be a humiliating expedient.' Ciano made no reply. 'I can do nothing now to hold the Duce back,' he commented. 'He has decided to act, and act he will. He believes in German success and in the rapidity of this success. Only a new turn in military events can induce him to revise his decision, but for the time being things are going so badly for the Allies that there is no hope.'

In his anxiety to join the conflict before it was too late, Mussolini persuaded himself that the Italians favoured the idea of joining it on [illegible] German side. The Italians were like a whore, he said, making a characteristically disdainful observation upon his countrymen: 'They are always on the side of the winner'. He assured Hitler, against all the evidence, that the feeling of the Italian people was 'unanimously against the Allies'.

Noting with alarm the Duce's hardening attitude, the British Government endeavoured by all means in their power to keep him out of the war. As shown by Foreign Office papers just released for historical study it was even for a time contemplated that Italy should be promised 'equal status to that of the belliger-

ents' at the peace conference 'in order that her territorial claims might be dealt with as part of the general settlement in Europe'. The offer, however, was never made, it being felt that Mussolini would reject it, 'maybe scornfully'. Instead, the British Council issued a pamphlet, with a commendatory preface by Lord Halifax, in which a careful distinction was made between the structure and principles of the Fascist State and the Nazi and Soviet States. Fascism, this pamphlet declared was a typical 'product of the Italian genius'; it threatened 'neither religious nor economic freedom nor the security of other European nations'.

Six days after replacing Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister, Winston Churchill made a personal plea to the man of whom in the 1920s he had been so warm an admirer. In 1927, on a visit to Rome, Churchill had been widely reported as having said, 'If I were an Italian, I would don the Fascist Black Shirt'; and at a subsequent press conference he had confirmed that, had he been Italian, he would have been wholeheartedly with the Fascists from start to finish in their 'triumphant str[illegible] the bestial appetites a[illegible] of Leninism'.

Now, Churchill ask[illegible] in a moving, rhetorical le[illegible]ulated to impress a former fellow journalist, 'Is it too late to stop a river of blood from flowing between the British and Italian peoples? We can no doubt inflict grievous injur[illegible] on one another and maul eac[illegible] cruelly, and darken the Med[illegible]anean with our strife. If you so decree, it must be so; but I declare I have never been the enemy of Italian greatness, nor ever at heart the foe of the Italian lawgiver . . . I beg you to believe that it is in no spirit of weakness or of fear that I make this solemn appeal, which will remain on record. Down the ages above all other calls comes the cry that the joint heirs of Latin and Christian civilization must not be ranged against one another in mortal

Neville Chambe[illegible]
n Rome. *Right:* M[illegible]
ristic speech-mak[illegible]

strife. Hearken to it, I beseech you in all [illegible] and respect, before the dre[illegible]s given. It will never be [illegible]

C[illegible]e the letter 'dignified and n[illegible]noted that even Mussolini 'appreciated the tone of it'. The Duce's reply, however, was not encouraging. He reminded Churchill of the initiative taken at Geneva in 1935 by [illegible]British Government to organize [illegible]ons against Italy while she was eng[illegible]d in securing for herself a small space in the African sun without causing 'the slightest injury' to other nations. He reminded him also of the state of servitude in which Italy found herself 'in her own sea'. 'If it was to honour its signature that your Government declared war on Germany,' he concluded, 'you will understand that the same sense of honour and of respect for engagements assured in the Italo-German treaty guides Italian policy today and tomorrow in the face of any event whatsoever.'

Ignoring the advice of the General Staff, who insisted that more time was vital to prepare the country for war, disregarding the warnings of Marshal Italo Balbo, one of the four leaders of the Fascist March on Rome, now Commander-in-Chief in Libya, who said in the middle of May that Italy could not possibly take the field for at least two months and then only after receiving 'a definite quantity of arms and military supplies', spurning the figures of General Carlo Favagrossa, Under-Secretary for War Production, who reported that even if he could have all the material already asked for (which would necessitate the [illegible]es working doubl[illegible] shifts) th[illegible]ate the co[illegible] would b[illegible] was [illegible] 1942, M[illegible] [illegible]at d[illegible] Italians [illegible] dreaded. [illegible] month, he ca[illegible] Marshal Pietro Badoglio, [illegible]zzo Venezia to tell him th[illegible] the date was now fixed for early th next month. Badoglio afterward claimed that he protested that t declare war so soon was tantamoun to suicide, a[illegible] that Mussolini, standing up behind [illegible]is desk, his hands on his hips, his jaw thrust out, in a familiar, dominant attitude, openi his dark eyes wide to stare fixedly a his critic, had replied i[illegible]periously: 'You, Marshal, are not ca[illegible]nough to judge the situation. I can tell you that everything will be over by September and that I only need a few thousand dead so that I can sit at the peace conference as a man who has fought.'

So, brushing aside the objections

Above: **Marshal Italo Balbo, one of the four leaders of the Fascist march on Rome.** *Below:* **Marshal Pietro Badaglio, Army Chief of Staff.** *Right:* **Historic moment: from the balcony of the Palazzo Venezia Mussolini announces Italy's declaration of war**

of Badoglio and Balbo, encouraged by the strongly pro-German Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, who had played a vital part in the conquest of Abyssinia, Mussolini informed Hitler that he would be ready to make the declaration upon 5th June unless the Führer considered it 'convenient to postpone it for some days'. A few days earlier he had reluctantly decided to do nothing until the end of the month; but now the surrender of the Belgian army made such a delay unthinkable.

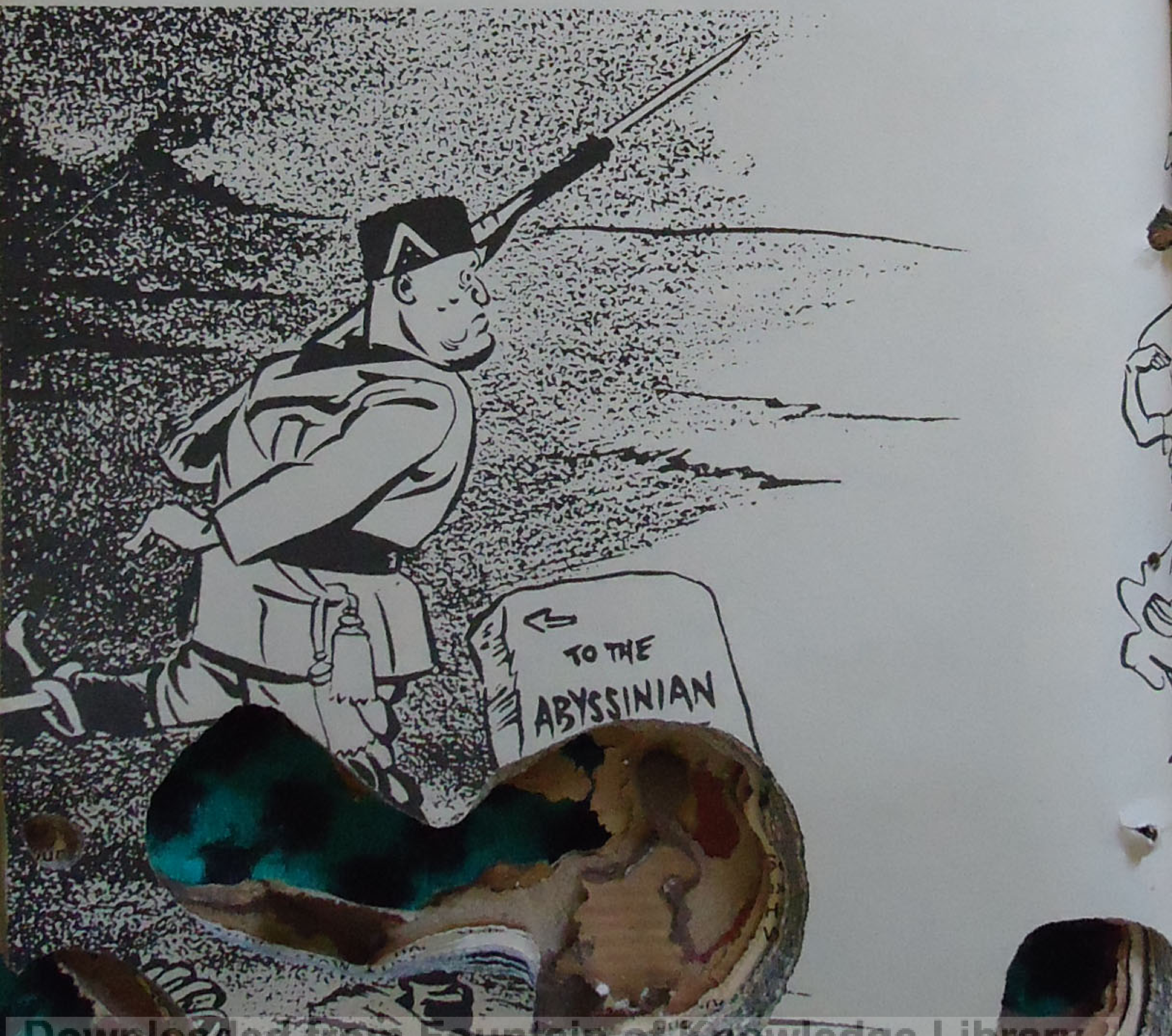
Hitler, however, was not quite ready for Italy to join him yet; he was planning a decisive attack on French airfields and did not want to risk a reshuffling of air dispositions which might interfere with his plans of destruction. Reluctantly Mussolini agreed to the postponem[illegible]ing 11th June instead, the[illegible]so he said, a date of good[illegible]m.

Marshal Balbo unha[illegible]rned to his command in It[illegible] hated the Germans and confessed to Ciano before he left that his forces were only adequate for a short conflict, and he feared the war woul[illegible] very long one. As a soldier, h[illegible]d fight; but he would do so with[illegible]onfidence in victory. It was a view shared by many of his colleagues.

Mussolini, on the contrary, awaited the time of his declaration of war with the utmost impatience and

anxiety, happy to learn on 8th June tha[illegible]rmans were meeting with st[illegible]ench resistance, for if t[illegible]kened now 'they would no[illegible]nd of the war too fresh and [illegible]g', and furious to hear on the [illegible] that Ribbentrop had had the impertinence to ask for the text of his forthcoming speech. 'He is the same presumptuous boor,' he angrily comm[illegible] 'I am not his servant and do not [illegible] to be.'

The nex[illegible] the fateful declaration was made at last. The Duce, now appointed Supreme Commander of the Forces in the Field, marched out onto the balcony overlooking the Piazza Venezia from which so many of his dramatic pronouncements ha been made, and called out in a unusually high-pitched voice: 'Figh ing men of the land, the sea and th air, Black[illegible]irts of the Revolutio and the Leg[illegible]s, men and women o Italy, of the Empire and of the King dom of Albania, hearken! An h marked by destiny is striking in th sky of our country; th[illegible]our of irrevocable decisions. We ar[illegible]tering the lists against the plutocratic and reactionary democracies of the West, who have always hindered the advance and often plotted against the very existence of the Italian people . . . At a memorable meeting in Berlin I said that, according to the laws of Fascist morality, when one has a friend one goes with him to the very end. We have done this and will do

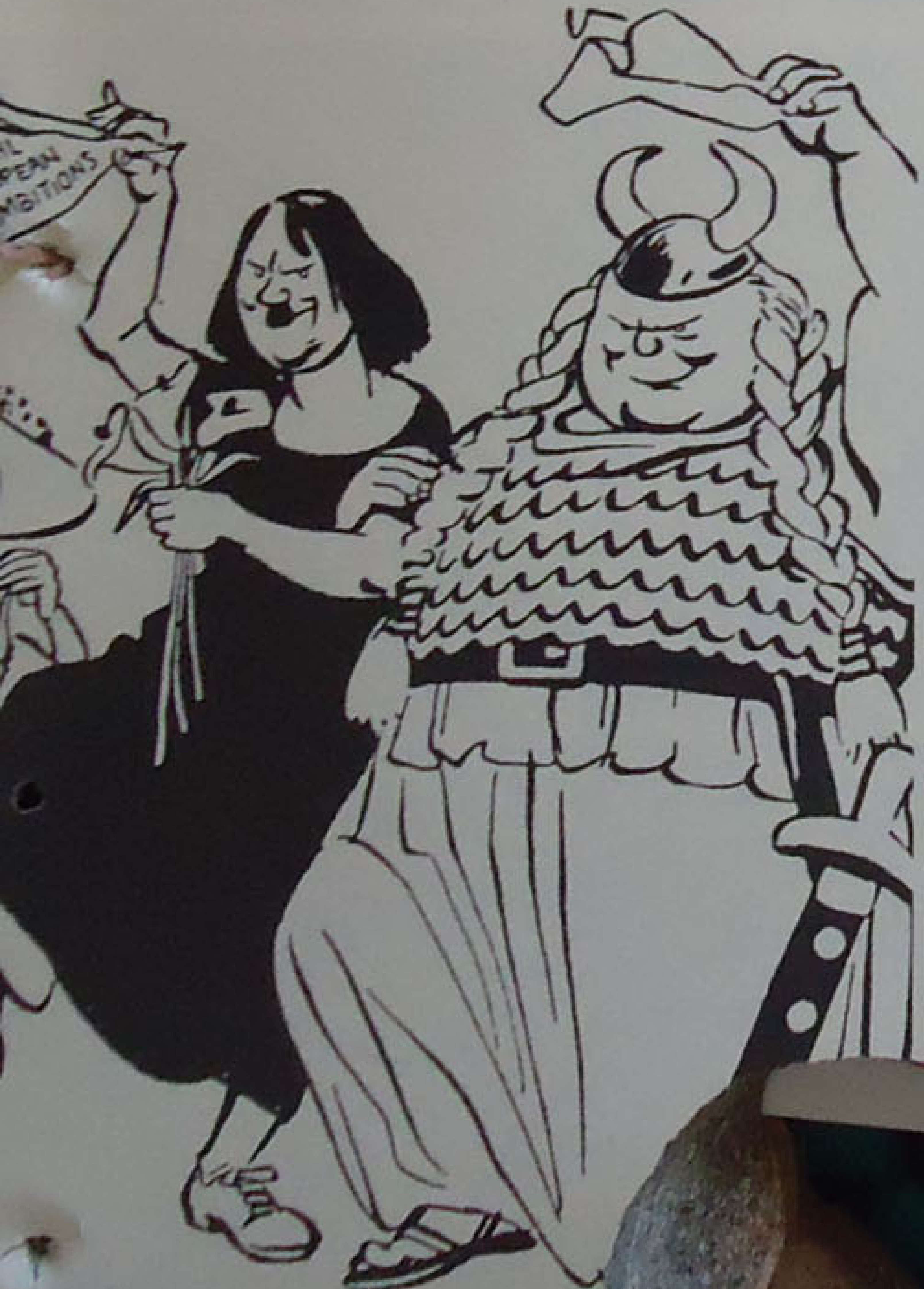


A contemporary British view of Italy's 'adventure' in North Africa this with Germany, with her people, with her victorious armed forces . . . Fascist Italy is . . . strong, proud and united as never before. The single and categoric watchword i[illegible]binding on us all. Already it is [illegible]ying through the air and kindling hearts from the [illegible]s to the Indian Ocean – to conquer. And we will conquer. And we will give finall[illegible] long period of peace with justi[illegible]o Italy, to Europe and to the world. People of Italy, to arms! Show your courage, your tenacity and your worth.'

The speech was greeted with wild cheers from the young Fascists in the square as were all such grandly oratorical displays by the Duce; but 'the shouts in the piazza', as Cavour had said, 'cannot be taken as manifestations of public opinion'. That night in Rome the city was strangely, dreadfully quiet as thou[illegible] in gloom in the knowledge o[illegible]es to come. 'I am sad, ve[illegible]o recorded in his diary[illegible] a widespread sentiment. [illegible]ture begins. May God help Italy'.

Italy certainly had need of help. As those few experts willing to face the Duce's wrath and scorn had warned him, Italy wa[illegible]elessly ill-prepared for war. T[illegible]yssinian campaign, followed by [illegible]lian intervention on Franco's side in the Spanish civil war, had placed so great a strain on the country's already inadequate military resources that Mussolini's often-repeated boast of '*otto milioni di baionette*' was impossible to justify. And even if it had been possible to supply eight million men with bayonets, the Italian army would still have remained with very little of the other equipment necessary to fight a modern war. Much of its equipment was obsolete, most of it was obsolescent. The armoured divisions lacked modern tanks and were so short of other vehicles that they even had to borrow from the police for military parades; the artillery still had in service guns that had been made in the First World War, and the lack of anti-aircraft defences was notorious. The navy had neither aircraft carriers nor a fleet air arm; the air force was even more badly equipped than the army, having less than a thousand effective aircraft, though General Giuseppe Valle, the Under-Secretary of the Air Force, assured Mussolini that he had at his disposal over three times that number.

All units were under-strength, many [illegible]alled divisions [illegible]mposed of [illegible]ee or fou[illegible]and few [illegible] thos[illegible]action. [illegible]bilize [illegible] me[illegible] [illegible]eneral [illegible]ecretary [illegible]nteed, it was [illegible]ne A[illegible] [illegible]d in effect that it was impo[illegible]f [illegible]ut under arms more th[illegible]



Top left : **The Duce inspects a guard of honour at Rome airport.** *Bottom left :* **Mussolini inspects a brigade of armoured cars. Despite his boasts, Italian resources were low when war broke out.** *Above :* **General Alberto Pariani, the Under-Secretary of the Army**

that number in a matter of weeks and then at inestimable cost to agriculture and industry.

Such miscalculations were characteristic of the superficially efficient Fascist Government, the contradictory and ill-organised policies of whose various Ministries may be gauged from the fact that vital supplies were still being exported to England as late as the beginning of 1940. Mussolini, who had been in charge of all three Service Ministries since 1925, apart from a short break between 1929 and 1933, might have been expected to know the actual state of affairs, and to have been warned by this knowledge against embarking on a disastrous war. But he had always been more interested in grand designs than in the [illegible] problems of logistics, more [illegible] with uniforms and decor[illegible] such matters as the in[illegible] the German goose-st[illegible] Italian army – the *pass*[illegible] elected to call it – t[illegible] important prob[illegible]d. Rather than [illegible] such problem[illegible] solution into t[illegible]

incompetent, and often sycophantic, subordinates who told [illegible] he wanted to be told, not [illegible] to have known. Eve[illegible] un-welcome truth was [illegible] his attention, he would, [illegible] was not, ignore it or choose to disbelieve it, so much a victim had he become of his own propaganda.

The more intelligent of his Ministers knew that his man[illegible]markable accomplishments did [illegible] include a talent for administration. He had no conception of how to run a government, at peace or at war; he had no taste for organisation, no patience with difficult work and a horror of decisions. He would write the word 'Approved' on two conflicting memoranda from two different Ministries and then go into another room where one of his mistresses lay waiting to satisfy the urgent demands of his inordinate sexual appetite. Of course, by temperament and by inclination he was not a politician at all, but a journalist whose genius – as he was proud to suggest himself – lay essentially in the manipulation of the masses by the written and spoken word. But the trouble was that Mussolini was not content with writing the stories and the headlines. He wanted to live them, and to parade in his glory across the world; and it was his growing jealousy of Hitler, his more capable and more ruthless rival that drove him on to his doom.

Having declared war, his only hope lay in its speedy conclusion before the futility of Fascist pretensions was exposed to the world. For, despite his angry rejection of the advice of his more cautious Ministers and [illegible]enerals, despit[illegible]eadiness to [illegible]e the bli[illegible] He w[illegible] in prefer-[illegible] the [illegible] entirely [illegible]ous c[illegible]ponsi[illegible] after war [illegible]pe he was [illegible]anded [illegible]aziani which revealed that the first-line fo[illegible] the army amounted to no [illegible]

Failure in Greece

Mussolini takes his leave after a meeting with the Führer. Italy, much to Mussolini's chagrin, lacked the resources to play the role Germany had assigned to her

Deprived by the armistice of the possibility of achieving military success against the French, Mussolini impatiently looked for other victims. He considered an att[illegible]k upon Yugoslavia, 'a typical Versailles creation working against us'. 'We must bring Yugoslavia to her knees,' he had already i[illegible]ted. 'We need raw materials and [illegible] must take them from Yugosla[illegible]ines.' He also envisaged an early attack upon Greece. But Hitler did not want to disturb that part of Europe yet for fear of what Russia's reactions would be to an Axis attack upon Yugoslavia and the effect of an attack upon Greece upon American public opinion and neutrality. He urged the Italians to concentrate their efforts upon the far more worthwhile project of ejecting the British from Egypt and the Middle East. Nothing would have pleased Mussolini more than a decisive attack upon Egypt from Libya where the Italian army had been strongly reinforced. But Graziani was making the usual difficulties: so serious an undertaking could not be launched at the moment, preparations were far from complete, further material and supplies were essential.

Mussolini grew more and more restless as the weeks passed in comparative quiet and his aggressive spirit had to be content with occasional bombardments of Malta and hit-and-run attacks upon isolated squadrons of the British fleet in the Mediterranean. He took to exaggerating every minor victory that was reported to him and to dismissing Italian losses as of no account. Although damage sustained [illegible] British navy was, in fact, [illegible] and the Italian navy kne[illegible] so, he chose to believ[illegible] inflated reports of the[illegible] *nautica*. In the middle [illegible] confidently asserting [illegible] [illegible]f the British na[illegible] [illegible]diterranean ha[illegible] [illegible]d much more th[illegible] forting illusion of nav[illegible]tories, though; he wanted to [illegible] stab with his short, pow[illegible] at the maps on the wal[illegible]azzo Venezia to demons[illegible]sitors how Italian forces w[illegible]ing back the armies of the decadent democracies.

Zealously he offered Hitler the help of Italian divisions and p[illegible] in the forthcoming invasion [illegible]land. For a long time there wa[illegible] reply; and when it came the answer was predictable: the offer was much appreciated, but the logistic problems of supplying two armies would be too great; and, in any case, the Italian sphere was the Mediterranean; would the Duce like some help in bombing the Suez Canal? So Mussolini had to wait, while Italian loses slowly mounted. Marshal Balbo was killed when his plane was fired on and shot down by one of his own anti-aircraft batteries at Tobruk where it had been mistaken for a British aircraft. A few days later Admiral Domenico Cavagnari, Chief of Naval Staff, constantly complaining of a lack of unity and an unwillingness of anyone to assume responsibility in the High Command, reported the loss of ten submarines; by the end of the first month of the war, 250 Italian planes had been shot down or destroyed on the ground.

Exasperated by the intolerable delays in initiating action on land in North Africa, Mussolini gave warning at a Council of Ministers on 7th September that unless an attack were launched the following Monday, Graziani would be replaced. Graziani reiterated his former pleas for caution and delay, protest[illegible] that all his [illegible]rals shared [illegible]tance; he [illegible]for a de[illegible]a month, [illegible]rsh[illegible]rted the [illegible]ress[illegible] [illegible] and th[illegible] [illegible]e initiative [illegible]een [illegible]e British. Th[illegible] [illegible] before Mussolini's declar[illegible]of [illegible]ar, Major-General Richard[illegible]

had been placed in command of a formation known as the Western Desert Force, whose headquarters were at Mersa Matruh, and had been told by Lieutenant-General Maitland Wilson, commander [illegible] the British troops in Egypt, that he was responsible for withstanding an Italian attack. The assignment was theoretically a formidable one, for Graziani had under his command a far superior force, comprising nine regular divisions, three Blackshirt divisi[illegible] two Libyan divisions, a tota[illegible]luding support troops, o[illegible],000 men. The defeat of [illegible] relieved these men [illegible]rding against any enemy th[illegible]from Tunisia or Algeria in the west, or from Niger and Chad in the south; so that all Graziani's forces could be concentrated for an attack on Egypt in the east. And in Egypt there were less than 40,000 British troops.

Undeterred by this, O'Connor and Wilson, and their superior commander General Wavell, were all determined

Left: **Marshal Graziani, Mussolini's man in Libya.**
Below: **Admiral Cavagnari, Chief of Naval Staff**

Above: The opposition in North Africa: General O'Connor (left) in command of the Desert Forces with General Wavell. *Right:* The Italian army in Egypt. *Below:* The Italians occupy Sidi Barrani. From here, Graziani considered further advance impossible

U.S.S.R.
Black Sea
TURKEY
SYRIA
TRANS-JORDAN
PALESTINE
Suez Canal
Port Said
Nile
Cairo
EGYPT
CYPRUS
17 SEPTEMBER 1940 ITALY'S INVASION OF EGYPT HALTED HERE
Mersa Matruh
El Alamein
Sidi Barrani
Sollum
Tobruk
Derna
Mekili
Benghazi
El Agheila
LIBYA
CRETE
Mediterranean Sea
GREECE
RUMANIA
BULGARIA
HUNGARY
YUGOSLAVIA
ALBANIA
AUSTRIA
SWITZ.
FRANCE
ITALY
Adriatic Sea
Venice
Pola
Rome
Brindisi
Taranto
Messina
Catania
SICILY
MALTA
Pantelleria
Cartellammare
Tripoli
Castel Benito
Spezia
CORSICA
SARDINIA
Terranova
Cagliari
Bizerta
Tunis
TUNISIA
ALGERIA
200
20
KEY
Wavell's advance.
Italian airport.
Italian naval base.

t campaign 1940

upon forceful, offensive action. No soo[illegible] war broken out than the W[illegible]ert Force was in action; a[illegible] few weeks 500 Italian so[illegible]wenty-five officers, inclu[illegible]ral, had been captured, many [illegible]ad been killed or wounded, and a large part of Graziani's army had been kept constantly on the alert along the frontier.

In c[illegible]ast, when Graziani's forces, six infa[illegible]divisions and eight tank battalions, [illegible]odded into action at last by Mussolini, made their attack in September, the movement was neither vigorous nor well directed. It soon dragged to a halt at Sidi Barran where Graziani ordered his men t establish themselves and to await th further supplies and equipment with out which [illegible]e considered a further advance imp[illegible]ible.

However, an advance had been made; the British had been pus back; Italian armies were in Egyp and Mussolini had cau[illegible] celebrate a victory. It was an o[illegible]unity he was not slow to take. A[illegible]rst he had been disturbed by the lumbering slowness of the Italian advance; but by 17th September he was 'radiant with joy'. He had taken the entire responsibility for the offensive on his shoulders, so Ciano said, and was 'proud that he was right'. Impatiently

Mussolini, Hitler and Ciano at the Brenner Pass meeting in October 1940 he waited for further news from Egypt, anxious to hear that Graziani had pushed on past Sidi Barrani, through Mersa Matruh to Alexandria. While waiting for new[illegible]e considered an attack upon Cor[illegible], and threatened to intervene also in Rumania. But it was the British in Egypt that most deeply concerned him; every day he spok[illegible]h irritation of Graziani's failure [illegible]new his advance. But he remaine[illegible] good humour, happily conscious that next time he met Hitler he would have reason to feel satisfied for the first time since the war had begun.

The meeting took place at the Brenner Pass on 4th October; and Mussolini was pleased to learn that there was no more talk of a German invasion of England, th[illegible] Germans had found the [illegible] hard nut to crack', that [illegible]portance was now bei[illegible] the Mediterranean area [illegible] Italy's advance into Egypt wa[illegible]seen as of much significance. Ciano had 'rarely seen the Duce in such good humour and good shape' as he was at the Brenner Pass. He talked [illegible]ially to Hitler as to an equal; [illegible]fterwards contentedly told Cian[illegible]hat he would now spur Graziani on to renew the offensive immediately, that he would dismiss General Ettore Muti as Secretary of the Fascist Party and find a more dynamic successor, that he detested the King, 'the only defeatist in the country'.

On his return to Rome, however, Mussolini's high spirits soon evaporated. There was another gloomy, hesitant despatch from Graziani, and worse than this, there were reports of the German occupation of Rumania, action which Hitler had taken without consulting him, without even mentioning to him his intentions. 'Hitler always faces me with a *fait accompli*,' he exclaimed angrily. 'This time I am going to pay him back in his own coin. He will find out from the papers that I have occupied Greece. In this way the equilibrium will be re-established.' He was asked if Marshal Badolgio was in agreement with this proposed attack. 'Not yet,' he admitted. 'But I shall send in my resignation as an Italian if anyone objects to our fighting the Greeks.'

The idea of an attack upon Greece through Albania had long intrigued him. Had it not been for Hitler's objections, and hi[illegible]n awareness [illegible]he could n[illegible] jeopardise [illegible]ential [illegible]man raw [illegible]aunched [illegible]he ga[illegible] powers, [illegible]kans with [illegible]ad strength- [illegible] The Soviet's [illegible]ned his reso[illegible] Bessarabia from [illegible] [illegible]ation of [illegible]

Bulgaria's reoccupation of South Dobr[illegible] Hungary's claim to the thre[illegible] provinces and North Tra[illegible]ad all been approved by G[illegible]ugh neither Bulgaria nor H[illegible] joined her side in the war as [illegible] had done. Now that Hitler's troops had marched into what was left of Rumania without reference to Italy, it was, Mussolini felt, tim[illegible]r his troops to march into Greece wi[illegible] reference to Germany.

He had a[illegible]dy warned Hitler in vague terms of what was to come, explaining that steps must be taken to prevent the Greek islands from becoming British bases; but nothing had been settled, and, although the Germans had been alarmed by reported increases in the number of Italian troops in Albania, and by the war of nerves that Italy was already waging against Greece, they had been reassured by Mussolini's excuse that the military measures he had taken on the Greek frontier were 'purely of a precautionary character', designed to guard against any British action in the area and to meet the threat of what he falsely alleged to be Greek mobilisation. It had seemed to the Germans, then, that Italy was prepared to concentrate upon her obligations to the Axis in north Africa.

To Mussolini these obligations were important enough, but they did not preclude him from having ambitions elsewhere. He recognised how vital Egypt, and the supply of oil from Iraq, was to the British; he once went so far as to say that the capture of Egypt was more important than the capture of London; but the occupation of G[illegible] would not be a[illegible] alternativ[illegible] occupati[illegible] Egypt. H[illegible] first th[illegible] and the[illegible] [illegible]hens [illegible] Cairo th[illegible]

The op[illegible] of Greece to[illegible] [illegible]ed peculiarly [illegible] [illegible]w [illegible]able, for s[illegible] satisfactorily isolate[illegible]

Turkey had declared her non-belligerency; Britain was too heavily committed in Africa and in the defence of her own island to offer the Greeks much help. M[illegible]eover, Mussolini was advised that [illegible]ek resistance would soon crumble. The most outrageous provocation had already been offered. Greek destroyers and submarines had been bombed in Navpak[illegible] harbour by Italian planes; a Gr[illegible]teamer had been attacked by an [illegible]ian submarine in the Mediterranean; a Greek cruiser, anchored at Tinos had been hit by an Italian torpedo while most of her crew were in church on the day of the Feast of the Assumption. Yet the Greek Press, under the stern eye of the authoritarian dictator, General Metaxas, did not make the protest that such actions seemed to demand; and, although Mussolini was given due warning that an attack on Greece would be resisted, he doubted that the resistance would be either strong or lengthy.

Certainly General Visconti Prasca, Commander-in-Chief of the Forces in Albania, did not believe in prolonged Greek resistance. Nor did General Francesco Jacomoni di Sanlavino, the Lieutenant-General of Albania. Nor did Ciano. Whether their advice was considered or disinterested, Mussolini did not trouble to enquire. It was the advice he wanted, and he accepted it. In fact, Visconti Prasca had already given his considered opinion at the end of January 1940 that the French army was the best in the world and that the Germans had been about to lose the imminent battle. Jacomoni, whose record as a prophet was no less unfortunate, [illegible]ied to a woman who was [illegible]e Ciano's mistress; and it [illegible]upposed in Rome at the [illegible]h Jacomoni and Ciano [illegible]advocated the attack [illegible]not so much as a check [illegible]nfluence in the Balkans [illegible]y had personal i[illegible] [illegible]ansion there.

[illegible] their motives [illegible]

the attack may have been, Mussolini was pleased to accept their advice, disregarding the contradictory counsels of the three Chiefs of the General Staff, who nervously pointed out the difficulties of embarking upon mountain warfare so late in the season. He also condemned as absurdly pessimistic a report by military intelligence, one of the few reliable branches of the [illegible] Army, that gave a disturbing estimate of the likely strength of Greek resistance.

Marshal Badoglio urged Ciano to try to persuade the Duce to reconsider his decision. The present forces in Albania were insufficient, he told Ciano. The navy did not think it could carry out a landing at Prevesa because the water was too shallow; an invasion that did not i[illegible]tely succeed would inevita[illegible]ng the war and lead to the [illegible] of Italy's already mea[illegible]es. Badoglio concluded b[illegible]at if Italy attacked Greece h[illegible] resign.

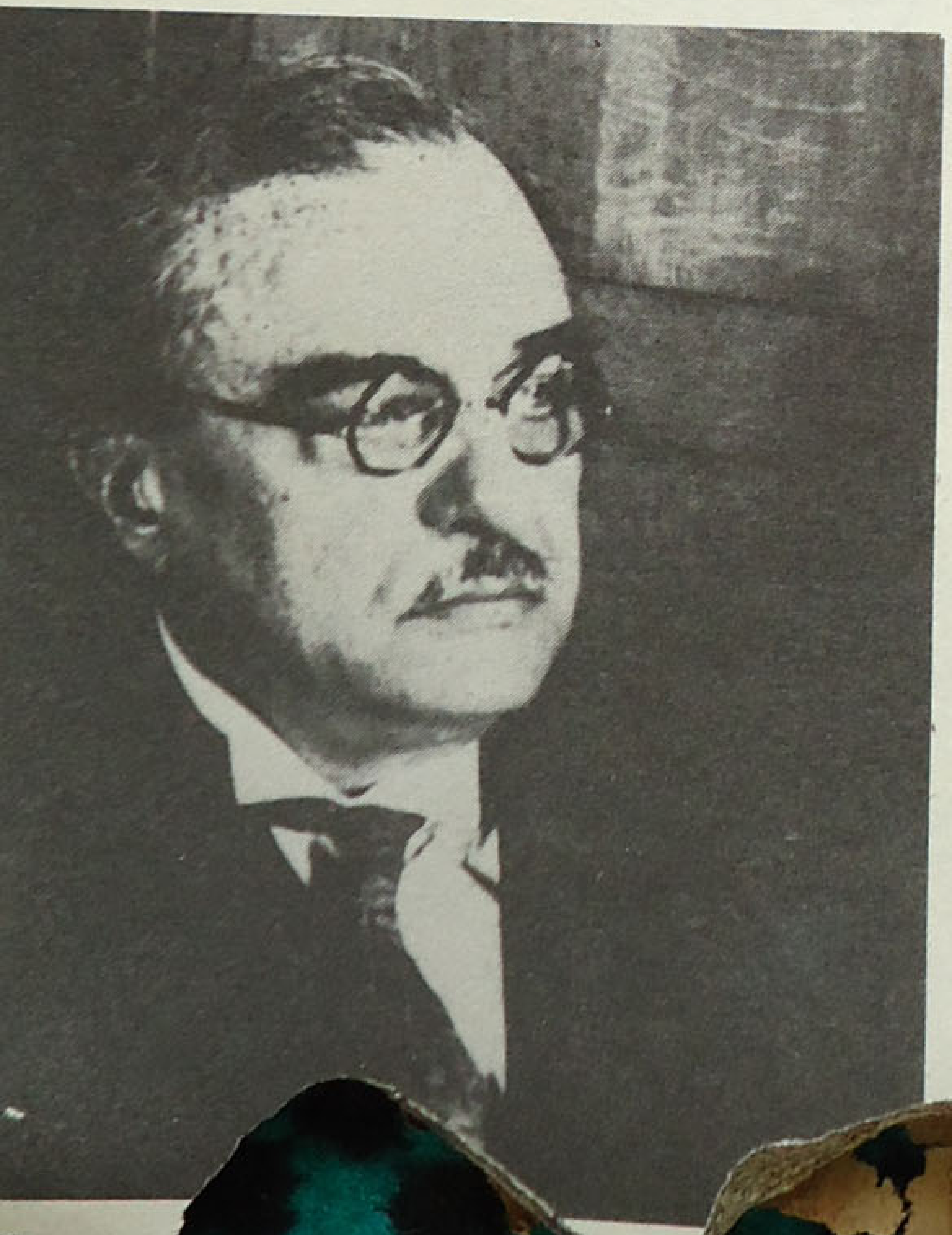
Mussolini, already in a bad temper because of Graziani's timidity in Egypt, exploded in 'a violent outburst of anger' at Badoglio's threat of resignation. He would go personally to Greece, he said, to witness the incredible shame of Italians who are afraid of Greeks'. If Badoglio offered

General Jacomoni (in black, right), Lieutenant-General of Albania, with Marshal Badoglio his resignation, he would accept it im[illegible]y and gladly. But Badoglio n[illegible]not offer his resignation, h[illegible]a warn Mussolini against th[illegible]venture in anything like[illegible] terms he had used in argume[illegible]th Ciano. So, not for the first time, Mussolini rushed into action only partially aware of the considered arguments against it, stubbornl[illegible]etermined to ignore the argume[illegible]hat were made, encouraged by t[illegible] support of those who fawned upon him and sought his favour.

Having prepared a letter to Hitler alluding in very general terms to his impending action but without making it clear what form that action would take or the date upon which it would be initiated, Mussolini sent Greece an ultimatum. He changed his mind repeatedly about the timing, General Armelini said, once five times in quarter of an hour; but eventually fixed the date for 28th October, t anniversary of the March on Rom

General M[illegible]taxas was woken up a three o'cloc[illegible]n the morning of tha day and handed the ultimatum b Emmanuele Grazzi, the Ital Ambassador in Athens. It demande passage across the fron[illegible] to variou strategic points in [illegible]e for a number of units of the [illegible]lian army in Albania, which would leave in three hours' time, at six o'clock that morning. It had been drawn up by Ciano and naturally it offered Metaxas no alternative: he would have to accept Italian occupation, or there would be war.

When Mussolini wrote to Hitler to inform him of his plans, the Führer was on his way to Hendaye to meet Franco in what was to prove an un-



Abov[illegible]
was h[illegible]
Octobe[illegible]
Greece or [illegible]
Mussolini on a visi[illegible] front in

successful attempt to bring Spain into the war. From Hendaye he went on to Montoire to a meeting with Marshal Pétain; but as soon as he received the letter (which had been intentionally delayed so that, by the time he received it, it would be too late to stop the action to which it so vaguely referred) Hitler left for Italy. Two hours before his train reached Florence [illegible] was told that he was, indeed, too late; and at the railway station he was greeted by the Duce's daunting words, 'Führer, we are on the march!'

Hitler accepted the news with less discomposure than the Italians had feared, going so far as to promise Italy his full support. Mussolini was seen, as before in Hitler's presence, to be 'in very good humour'.

On his return to Rome, however, the clouds gathered once more. The news from Greece was not encouraging.

The Greeks' initial re[illegible]ot been as swift as some [illegible]ligence officers had fea[illegible]eek army comprised but fi[illegible]sions, and of these, twelve did not receive their mobilisation orders until after the invasion had actually begun; but if the Greeks were initially slow to react, General Visconti Prasca's forces were slower stil[illegible] the first two days they advanced no farther than six miles along the coast road to the south; and in the north they did not manage to get forward at all.

The delay was disastrous. Before the end of the first week in November, the Greeks had begun to resist with the grimmest determination under the skilful direction of their gifted commander, General Papagos. They were outnumbered; their equipment was

Above : **Hitler arrives in Florence to be told of his ally's invasion of Greece.** ***Right :*** **From the snow-covered mountains of Albania, Italian troops cross into Greece.** ***Below :*** **Into the attack – Italian troops in Greece.**

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150
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240
AUSTRIA
HUNGARY
RUMA A
Zagreb
Belgrade
YUGOSLAVIA
Sarajevo
Nish
BULGARIA
Adriatic Sea
Kotor
Skolpje
ALBANIA
Durazzo
Tirana
Valona
ITALY
Salonika
GREECE
Larissa
Yannina
Aegean Sea
Athens
Patras
Kalamata
SICILY
Ionian Sea
CRETE
KEY
Italian advances April
German advances Ap
Italian Albania.
Italian Albania occupi

ns campaign

inferior; but they were fighting furio[illegible]efence of their country, in a[illegible]h they knew to be just. The[illegible]ttacked with spirit, capt[illegible] Pissoderi, over three miles [illegible]bania; they almost surrounded the 'Julia' Division of Alpini, one of the finest units in the whole Italian Army, and virtually destroyed it, inflicting upon it some 20,000 ca[illegible]lties and capturing 5,000 prisoners.

Mussolini was appalled, and gave vent, in his disappointment and anger, to angry reproaches of Jacomini and Visconti for representing the operation 'as too easy and sure of success'. Visconti was removed from his command and replaced by General Ubaldo Soddu, who had been far more cautious in his estimations of the Italians' capabilities than his predecessor had been, yet who was to prove no more capable of leading them to victory. On 18th November, after brave resistance by the N[illegible]th Army, the Army of the Po, the Ita[illegible]ans were driven back with heavy losses across the border into Albania, and the first phase of the ignominious campaign w[illegible] over.

There were worse blows [illegible]o come. At Taranto, British S[illegible]sh aircraft launched from carri[illegible]attacked the Italian fleet at anchor with torpedos and put three Italian battleships, the *Littorio*, the *Duilo* and the *Cavour*, out of action.

Mussolini had scarcely had time to recover from these blows in the Mediterranean and in Greece when he was further humiliated by a letter from Hitler.

31
ai suoi fanti che
primi aprirono la
via alla vittoria

Above: Ma[illegible] of an Italian sc[illegible] [illegible]s of Italian nationalism – Greek

The Führer had accepted the Italian invasion of Greece without complaint at the end of October, when assured by a confident Mussolini that the campaign would soon be won and all fighting would be over before any hornets' nests in the Balkans or in America were disturbed. But now, three weeks later, the Greeks had astonished the world by their toughness and [illegible]ence; and the Italians had suffered a series of embarrassing defeats, the consequences of which were incalculable. The more deeply he pondered Mussolini's misguided action, the more catastrophic it appeared to Hitler to be. Indeed, according to the Hitler-Bormann documents published in 1961, he considered it the greatest single contribution to his ultimate failure. In his letter he told Mussolini just what the Italian failu[illegible]nt: Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, V[illegible]ce and Turkey would no[illegible] increasingly reluctant to [illegible]selves, while Russia's [illegible] the Balkans might well lead to a new threat from the east. Moreover, by attacking Greece, Italy had placed Metaxas firmly in the Allied camp and had enabled the British to obtain bases from which they could bomb Rumania and the south of Italy. Finally, the far more important operations in the desert against Egypt would now have to be postponed until the next year when the Germans would unwillingly have to send troops into Thrace.

Mussolini read Hitler's letter more than once, commenting bitterly to

The [illegible] battleship *Littorio* out of
a[illegible] the British air attack on
T[illegible]

Ciano, 'He really smacked my fingers.' Yet the Duce was content to lay the blame upon his incompetent subordinates and upon the Italian soldiers who – according to that 'sinister buffoon', General Achille Starace, a former Secretary of the Fascist Party – had fought 'but little and badly'. 'The human material I have to work [illegible] is useless, worthless,' Mussolini complained once again. 'Every man must make one fatal error in his life. And I made mine when I believed General Visconti Prasca. But how could I have avoided it when he seemed so sure of himself, so full of confidence?' Above all, Mussolini blamed Marshal Badoglio, his now detested Chief of the General Staff, a 'traitor', an 'enemy of the régime' whom he was now determined to replace. Allessandro Pavolini, the Minister of Popular Culture, dutifully informed Mussolini of a conversation he had had with Badoglio who had said: 'There is no doubt that Jacomini and Visconti Prasca have a large share of responsibility in the Albanian affair, but the real blame must be sought elsewhere. It lies entirely with the Duce's command. This is a command that he, the Duce, cannot hold. Let him leave everything to us, and when things go wrong, let him punish those responsible.'

Upon hearing this, Mussolini was more than ever determined to rid himself of the 'traitor'; and at the beginning of December he accepted Badaglio's resignation, appointing General Count Ugo Cavallero, an optimist who did not believe 'in the possibility of defeat' in Albania, to take his place.

Cavallero's optimism wa[illegible] justified. On 4th Dece[illegible] reached Rome of the los[illegible] and of a new and dan[illegible] thrust through the [illegible] General Soddu report[illegible] situation was [illegible] [illegible]n and that '[illegible] settled throu[illegible] [illegible]on'.

Mussolini called Ciano [illegible] Palazzo Venezia and told hi[illegible]edly, 'There is nothing else [illegible]s is grotesque and absurd[illegible]act. We have to ask for [illegible]ough Hitler.' Ciano had ne[illegible]e seen the Duce so utterly discouraged.

He was 'plunged in the depths of depression,' the Italian Ambassador to Germany, Dino Alfieri, who was in Rome at that time, confirmed. 'I had never seen him looking so dispirited. His face was pale and drawn, his expression sad and preoccupied. His dejected look was increased by his wearing a shirt with a grotesquely big turn-down collar and by his not having shaved for at least two days . . . He paced slowly round his big desk, taking short steps and, as if developing an idea, which dominated his mind, talked of Soddu's telegram and tried to fathom the reasons that had prompted the General to exaggerate the gravity of the situation. He kept passing his right hand nervously across his chin and face, turning now to Ciano, now to me, as though seeking approval or support for his theories and justification for his hopes.'

Gradually he came to the view that the situation might yet be saved, and he sent Cavallero to the front to make a personal report. Cavallero, as was his nature, found the situation 'quite serene', despite the fact that Soddu's despatches continued to be gloomy and foreboding. Concluding from this that Cavallero was the man to solve the crisis, and angered by reports that Soddu spent much of his time composing music for the films, Mussolini ordered the newly-appointed Chief of the General Staff to take [illegible]al command [illegible]mmander [illegible] second [illegible] Italian [illegible] litt[illegible]ion [illegible]ssoli[illegible]at men [illegible] for being [illegible] Fascists did [illegible]faithful an[illegible] [illegible]t necessarily make good ge[illegible] [illegible]ive Generals are prisoner[illegible] is dea[illegible]e noted morosely. 'That is the [illegible]alians who have military qua[illegible] those who have none. In [illegible]e shall create an army of p[illegible], selecting them out of th[illegible] or thirteen million Italians in the Valley of the Po and in the regions of Central Italy. All the others will be put to work making arms for the warrior aristocracy.' In the m[illegible]ntime the troops ought at least to be able to fight even though so incompetently led. He sent a harsh letter to Cavallero with an order to his men to die at their posts. 'It is more than an order from me,' he wrote. 'It is an order from our country.'

But he had no faith in Cavallero any more; he no longer believed wha he said. 'These generals,' he told Ciano, 'have become like those country inn[illegible]pers who paint a cock on the wall an[illegible]nder it write, "When this cock begins to crow, on y[illegible] credit I'll bestow". I, too, will gran the credit when they p[illegible]e by som action that the situatio[illegible] changed . . . I must recognise tha[illegible] Italians of 1914 were better than t[illegible]. It's not flattering, for the régime, but that's how it is.' It was Christmas Eve 1940, and it was snowing. He looked out of the window into the piazza and murmured grimly, 'This snow and this cold are very good. In this way our good-for-nothing Italians, this mediocre race, will be improved. One of

Mussolini discusses strategy with his generals in Greece

the principal reasons I have desired the reforestation of the Apennines has been to make Italy colder and snowier.'

After Christmas, M[illegible]solini decided that the time had c[illegible]e for personal intervention. He left Rome to confer with Cavallero and the other generals and to di[illegible]uss an Italian counter-offensiv[illegible]t although he departed in determ[illegible] mood the inconclusive discuss[illegible]bout future plans brought back his former depression. It was decided that two fresh divisions, one of them the crack Lupi di Toscana division, should make a renewed attack on the Greek lines in the middle of January; but not even Cavallero seemed confident of success. And Mussolini returned to Rome sombre and pessimistic. 'Greece was a political masterpiece,' [illegible]ented. 'We succeeded in isolati[illegible]ntry so that it had to fig[illegible]one. Only the Italian [illegible] us completely.'

His depression and [illegible]iety were increased by the knowledge that the time was approaching when he would have to meet Hitler again, and that he would have to meet [illegible]m 'under conditions of obvious [illegible]nferiority'. He had postponed the meeting twice in the hope that better news would come from the front, and once he had tried to cancel it altogether. But the time had come when he could delay the meeting no longer. He left by train for Salzburg on 18th January 1941, 'frowning and uneasy', shaken by news of further Italian reverses.

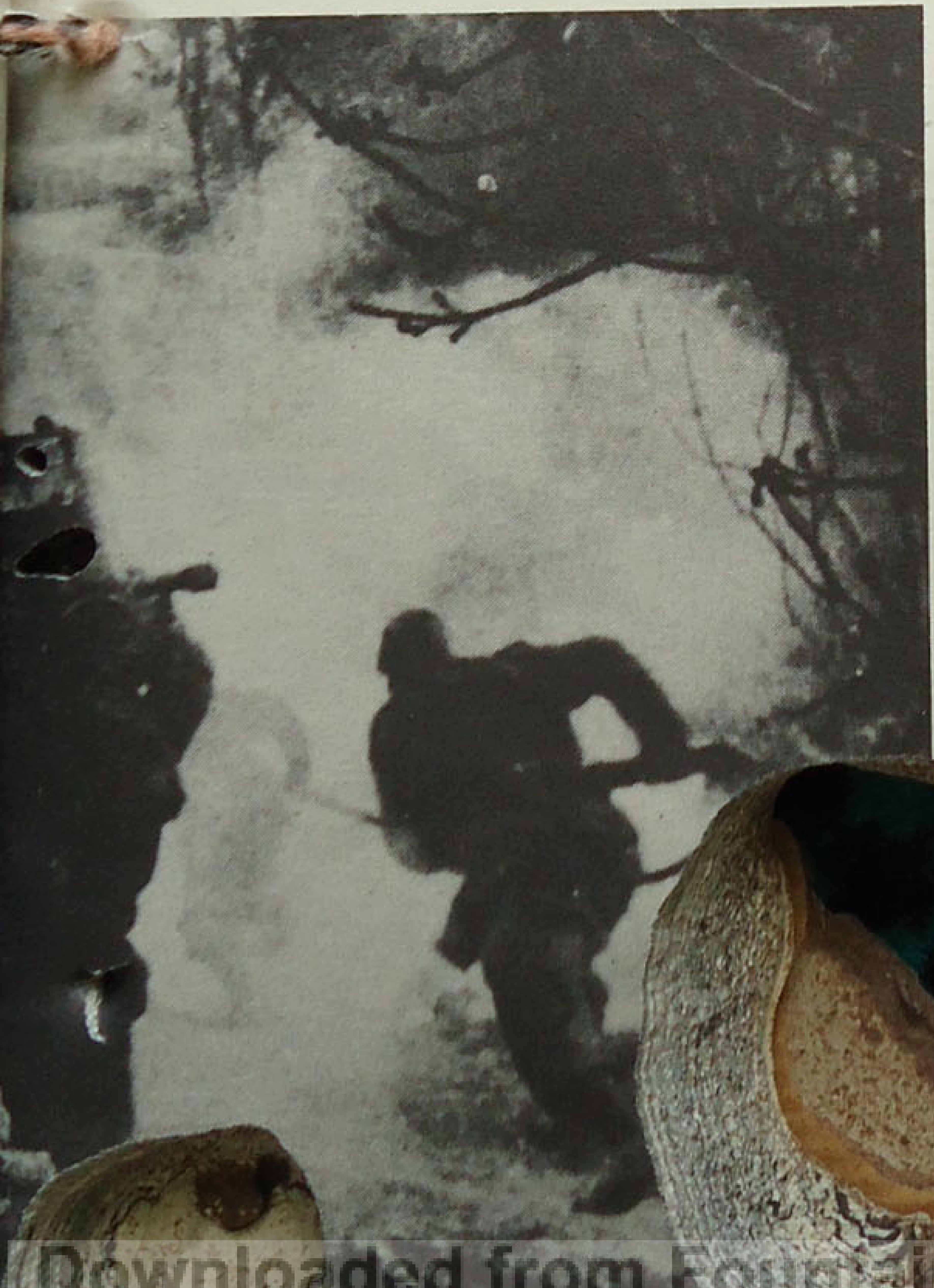
The ill-directed counteroffensive launched by the two fresh divisions in the Klissoura area a few days earlier had met with hard resistance. The Greeks had held their ground, then pushed forward themselves to take Klissoura and to threaten Vlonë on Albania's Adriatic coast. The weather prevented further Greek advances; but by the time Mussolini reached Salzburg it was known that the Italian armies had suffered severe casualties, lost rather than gained ground, and that the Lupi di Toscana division had failed to distinguish itself.

Hitler was waiting on the platform at Pusch, standing in the snow in his long leather greatcoat with his cap pulled down over his ears. As his Pullman coach drew to a halt opposite him, Mussolini murmured, 'I haven't enough blood in my veins even to blush when I see him.'

[illegible] got out sl[illegible]ked towards [illegible]ard. They [illegible]his feat[illegible]ing each [illegible]en H[illegible]tures re-[illegible]cial smile. [illegible]of the Italian [illegible] appeared that [illegible] delegation [illegible] Hitler was ready to be under[illegible]of and helpful, even cordial. There were to be [illegible]f those reproaches and recr[illegible] that they had feared. To [illegible] however, this kindly atti[illegible]ost as intolerable as strict[illegible] have been; he interpreted it [illegible]ondescension, and was not prepared to accept the assistance which the Germans were willing to offer him. Indeed, when the Italian Ambassa[illegible]r took him aside for a moment before the conference began and said that the Führer would listen favourably to any request for help, Mussolini interrupted him sharply. 'I have nothing to ask.'

If he had nothing to ask, Hitler had much to say. And while Mussolini sat hunched in his armchair, the Führer launched into one of those lengthy monologues in which he liked to display his undoubted talents as a

Right: Ciano with General Guzzoni after a meeting with Hitler. Guzzoni was particularly impressed with the Führer's oratory. *Below:* Italian infantry go into the attack



master strategist. Cavallero's deputy, General Guzzoni, a rath[illegible]urd little figure with an imm[illegible]ch and dyed hair, was deep[illegible]d; so were Ciano and Al[illegible]ussolini's growing jealo[illegible] not allow Hitler the merit o[illegible] genius. He listened to him with evident intentness, making an occasional comment; but he was obviously ill at ease, embarrassed by what he to[illegible] to be Hitler's patronising references to Italy, to the hints that Italians would be better employed in German factories than in the front line. When he spoke it was as though German were a language new to him, although in fact he knew it well. At meal times there was something even pathetic in the way he tucked his napkin into the collar of his uniform and concentrated in silence upon his food – though eating little and very quickly – and in the way, at tea-time the first day, he tried unsuccessfully to push his chair back from the oppressive heat of the fire, and sipped a cup of camomile tea, while Hitler, untroubled by ulcers, ate a great quantity of his favourite jam tarts and biscuits and Göring, resplendent in a new, dove-grey uniform, talked endlessly.

After the conference Mussolini reluctantly agreed that Hitler had been 'polite, friendly and understanding'; yet he felt compelled to add that it had all been overdone. 'The man is hysterical,' he told Alfieri. 'When he told me that no-one had lived through my anguish and shared it more intensely than he had done, there were tears in his eyes. It's all so exaggerated. He was too eager to make me feel and appreciate his kindness and [illegible]nerosity, his streng[illegible] and superio-

[illegible]ermany, [illegible]theless [illegible] 'as he [illegible]lat[illegible]itler [illegible]mined [illegible] on the [illegible] go there Alb[illegible] presence would person, an[illegible] [illegible]ely inspire a victory.

Gread ees in the Middle East. By

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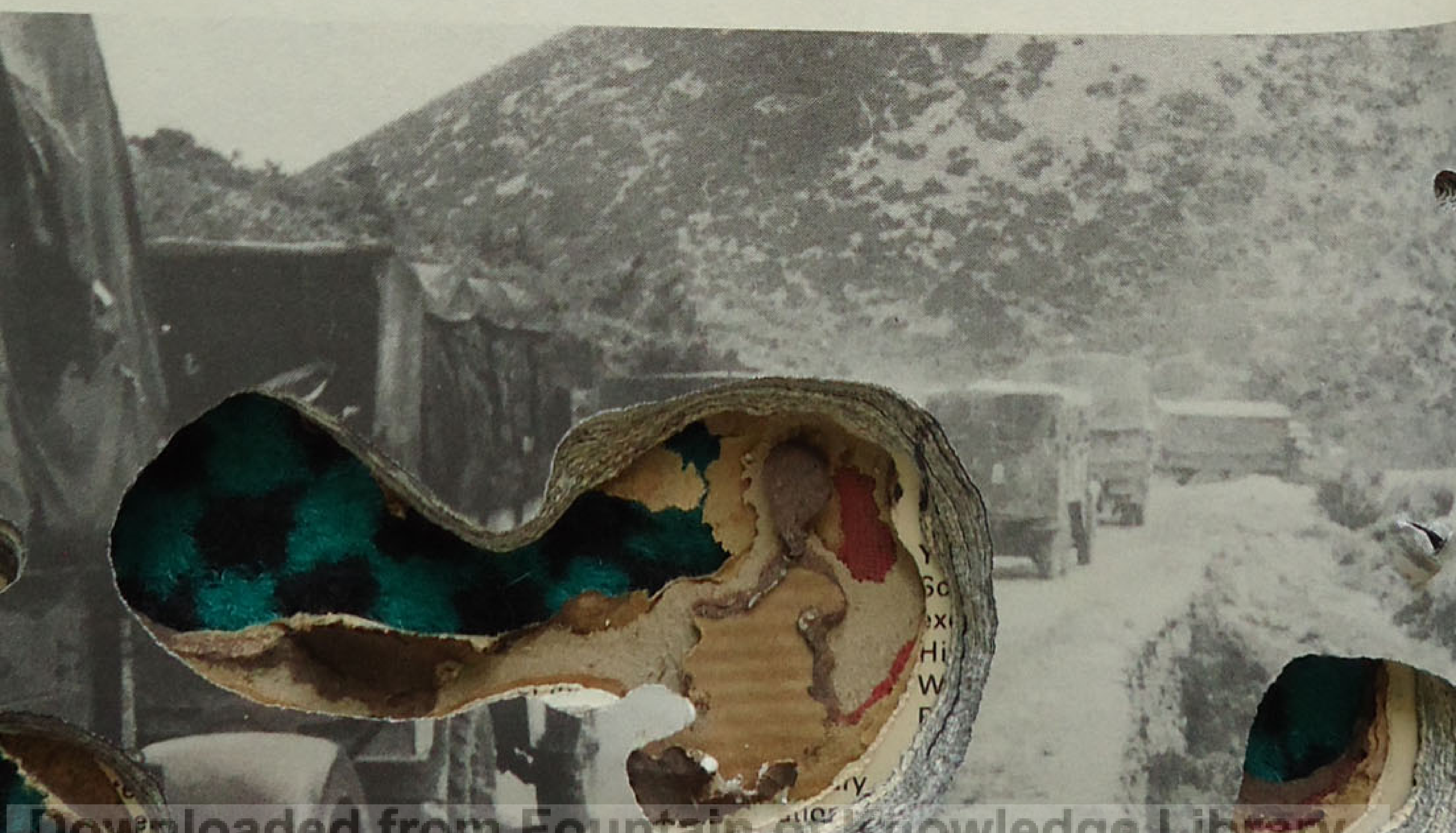

Steadily the Italian army in Albania was reinforced until there were twenty-eight divisions there, and a powerful counteroffensive against the fourteen Greek divisions seem[illegible] certain of success. Mussolini left for the front at the beginning of March, keeping [illegible] departure secret so that no blame could be a[illegible]hed to him if things went wr[illegible]ut eager to announce his prese[illegible] soon as victory was in sight.

On 9th March the counteroffensive began. Seven divisions, supported by 160 bombers and 159 fighters, attacked on a twenty-mile front between the Vijose river and Mount Tommorit. They attacked in vain; they fought hard; but the battered Greek divisions held firm. On 19th March, nine days before the Italian battleship *Vittorio Veneto* was badly damaged and three Italian cruisers were sunk off Cape Matapan, the counteroffensive ground to a halt.

The victory that Mussolini had so desperately wanted to achieve before the Germans intervened [illegible]uded him. And now when Hitle[illegible]he Balkan war, it would [illegible]us to the world that he h[illegible]ed to do so in order to[illegible] his incompetent allies. The [illegible]ention came earlier than expected, for at the end of March a group of Yugoslav officers seized power in Belgrade, overthrowing a Governme[illegible] that had recently signed a pact binding the country to the Axis. Immediately following this *coup*, Hitler announced that Yugoslavia must be crushed with 'merciless harshness'. Asking the Italians to call a halt to their operations in Albania for a few days and to cover the Yugoslav frontier with Italian troops, he fixed the attack for 6th April. On the same day, he informed Mussolini, Operation Marita against Greece would also begin. All Italian forces, he suggested, should be placed under German command. Mussolini had no alternative but to agree.

Ten divisions of the German Twelfth Army were employed in Operation Marita and were almost immediately successful. By 27th April, Athens had surrendered; the Yugoslavs had already surrendered ten days before.

Both surrenders were accepted, and the new frontiers drawn without reference to Italy. And although Hitler in a speech to the Reichstag tactfully described the German action in Greece as 'a precautionary measure against the British attempt to entrench themselves in the Balkans', no-one could doubt that he had been forced to take that action because of Italy's failure.

Mussolini, now gloomily forecast-[illegible]ar that wo[illegible]until 1948, [illegible]e bitte[illegible]ermans [illegible] 'T[illegible]ng and [illegible]ones [illegible] dogs, [illegible]ot go on [illegible], I've had [illegible]he way he acts.' [illegible]ough of Hi[illegible] the Duce, though, there w[illegible] [illegible]rse humiliations yet to co[illegible]

Below: Hitler's forces on a mountain road between Katerini and Elasson. The Germans succeeded where the Italians failed in Greece. *Above left:* In the heart of conquered territory, the German army in Athens

Humiliation

Facing the British – the Italian
North Africa

Ever since Graziani's forces had co[illegible]e end of their advance at Si[illegible] in September the year be[illegible]lini had been pressing fo[illegible] attack on the British posi[illegible]ersa Matruh and for a continued advance towards Alexandria. But Graziani had stayed where he was, protesting that deeper penetration into Egypt was impossible without more equipment, tanks and guns; and when the stalemate was broken again it was the British who broke it. As early as 21st September, only a week after Graziani's attack had begun, General Wavell had giv his Chief of Staff a directive outlin plans for the recapture of Sidi Ba rani, the occupation of Bardia a Tobruk an[illegible]f these objectives we realised, a move down to Derna f Cyrenaica. Later, on 2nd Novemb he wrote to General Maitland Wils telling him to inform [illegible] senior co manders that he h[illegible]nstructe General O'Connor 't[illegible]pare a offensive operation aga[illegible]e Italia forces in their present positions (i they do not continue their advance to take place as soon as possible I realise the risks of such an operation [to be known as Operation Compass] and am fully prepared to

Libyan troops go into the attack against the Italians accept them, and the possibility of considerable casualties . . . I consider that the advantages of the operation entirely justify the risks. Nor do I consider the risks exce[illegible]ve. In everything but numbers we are superior to the enemy. We are more highly [illegible]ained, we have better equipment. We know [illegible] ground and are better accusto[illegible]to desert conditions. Above a[illegible]ave stouter hearts and greater [illegible]ions and are fighting in a worthier cause . . . '

Wavell's confidence was entirely justified. At dawn on 10th December Operation Compass began, and from the first it went according to plan. After an intensive artillery bombardment the British and Indian troops attacked and within a matter of minutes twenty-five Italian tanks had been put out of action and General Maletti, the divisional commander at Nibeiwa south of Sidi Barrani, had been killed as he came out of his dug-out. During the course of the next three days fighting, the 4th Blackshirt Division and the 1st and 2nd Libyan Divisions had been severely mauled; 38,000 prisoners had been taken, including four generals, together with nearly 250 guns and over seventy tanks. At a loss of 624 men, O'Connor had virtually cleared Egypt of Italian troops.

The news, as Ciano said, came to Italy like a thunderbolt. 'It makes a bad situation worse,' he wrote in his diary. 'Public opinion had already been shaken and too much divided to receive this new and heavy blow calmly.' Mussolini managed at first to maintain an Olympian calm, but by 12th December he was 'ver[illegible] shaken'. 'We have suffer[illegible] defeat,' he admitted gra[illegible] time it will not be said th[illegible] [illegible]o blame. I have left [illegible] authorities the most a[illegible] of action.' Once agai[illegible] Gr[illegible]i whose pleas f[illegible] [illegible]nks, guns and [illegible] [illegible]issed as mere e[illegible] [illegible]reak steel ar[illegible]

finger-nails alone,' Graziani [illegible]tested; but Mussolini remained [illegible]d by such emotional outbu[illegible] is another man with w[illegible]not get angry,' he comm[illegible]ain-fully, 'because I despi[illegible]

Having lost faith in Graziani, Mussolini placed his trust in the respected, grey-bearded General Bergonzoli, the commander in Bardia, and he sent him a personal message of encouragement: 'I am sure that 'Electric Beard' and his brave soldiers will stand at whatever cost, faithful to the last.'

Graziani doubted the army's ability to make an effective stand at Bardia and suggested that the town should be evacuated and the Italian forces withdrawn to Tobruk. But Mussolini refused to consider the loss of so large an area of Cyrenaica without a fight. To Graziani's protestations that a staged withdrawal to Tobruk would give time for a build-up of a far stronger defensive line than could be formed at Bardia, Mussolini sternly declared that there could be no question of retreat to Tobruk. Firm resistance must be offered at Bardia and the British must be worn out in unsuccessful attempts to capture it.

General Bergonzoli's forces, however, were unequal to the task which the Duce had allotted them. When Australian troops launched their attack on 3rd January, they were immediately successful, and Bardia surrendered two days later. Nearly 40,000 Italian troops, well over 250 field and anti-aircraft guns, 120 tanks and 700 other vehicles fell into Allied hands. General Bergonzoli himself managed to escape to Tobruk, but Graziani had [illegible] confidence of [illegible] able to hold [illegible]e now th[illegible] men and [illegible] equi[illegible] lost at [illegible]ompa[illegible] befo[illegible]an eight [illegible] he could [illegible] men, mostly muster few [illegible] Division but incl[illegible] the 61st Division [illegible] most 10,000 stragglers fro[illegible]

Belo[illegible]ith the Australian divisions ad[illegible] Allied forces in Africa, w[illegible]urrender was forced on the Ita[illegible]ne prisoner carries his dog[illegible]ty. *Right :* Capitulation at Bar[illegible]rly 40,000 Italian troops surrendered here

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formations. His air support had been reduced to 119 planes; his tanks numbered less than seventy, his guns about 220. His reserves were confined to the 60th Division at [illegible]rna, the 17th at Benghazi and a small armoured group south of Derna at Mechili.

As Graziani had gloomily foreseen, these forces [illegible]ere incapable of holding Tobruk [illegible]ed. Many units fought with p[illegible] bravery against a far better le[illegible] infinitely better trained and equipped enemy; but the result was never in doubt. Before the end of the month Tobruk had fallen, and tens of thousands more prisoners, hundreds more tanks and guns, vast stores of food and 10,000 tons of fresh water had been captured.

The fall of Tobruk was soon followed by the evacuation of Derna; and at the beginning of February the British and Commonwealth troops reached Beda Fomm south of Benghazi. By then the Italian army had lost ten of its best divisions, 850 guns, 400 tanks, and so many vehicles that they had not been properly co[illegible] Over 130,000 Italian soldier[illegible] now prisoners of war.

Below: **British troops leave their shelter to attack Tobruk.** *Above left:* **Advanced light armoured units push on to Derna, leaving Tobruk besieged**

Seriously alarmed [illegible]sive collapse of his allies, [illegible]te to Mussolini making it cl[illegible] that he considered it essential that German troops must now intervene if Tripoli were to be saved. Bitterly, Mussolini was forced to accept the humiliation of German assistance; and on 11th February Lieutenant-General Erwin Rommel arrived in Italy.

The Duce recognised that Rommel was a far better general than any the Italian army possessed; but it was a cruel blow to his pride to have to accept the fact that this single German officer and a relatively small number of German troops were able to alter the whole aspect of the war in North Africa within a few weeks of their arrival there. Gloomily he compared the reputation of Rommel, who was said always to be in a tank at the head of his attacking columns, with that of Graziani who remained 'seventy feet underground in a Roman tomb'. As Rommel prepared himself and his men for a counterstroke against the Allied troops, Mussolini could not anticipate the promised victory with any pleasure, knowing that it would be a German victory and not an Italian one.

In June, Mussolini was further humiliated when the Germans attacked Russia without telling him anything of their plans until the invasion had actually begun. At half past four in the morning of the 22nd, the Italian ambassador in Berlin was summoned to the *Auswäritge Amt* [illegible] he was told that German [illegible] had cross[illegible]ssian fron- [illegible]e and [illegible]viously. [illegible] he w[illegible] [illegible] His w[illegible] [illegible] she gave [illegible]ommented [illegible]ly, [illegible]achele, this [illegible]eans the war is lost.' Late[illegible] [illegible]grily condemned the Ger[illegible] of this fr [illegible] evidence of the little regard in w [illegible] ey held him. 'I do not dist [illegible] my servants at night,' he c [illegible] 'but the Germans make me [illegible] of bed at any hour witho [illegible] ast consideration.' He became more angry than ever when his offer of Italian assistance on the Russian front was greeted without the least enthusiasm in Berlin.

The Duce had been 'very much excited at the idea of this participation', Ciano noted; and after revi ing one of the selected divisions telephoned Rome from Verona to s that it was 'perfect'. It was a divisio he went so fa [illegible] s to suggest, 'supe to the Germa [illegible] s, both in men a equipment'. Disregarding Hitler's l than lukewarm reception of his off he insisted that over 2 [illegible] 000 Itali troops be despatched to [illegible]. Every responsible Italian gene [illegible] recate the decision: such a forc [illegible] t trans form the situation in Africa, he wa advised; it would be far better to le the Germans fight the Russians o their own. But Mussolini was adamant. It was not a matter of personal pride he said. Italy must contribute al

Italians in unfamiliar terrain in the Soviet Union. Mussolini had insisted that, despite its deficiencies, the Italian army must support the Germans in all theatres of war she could to ensure 'a *blitz* victory'. 'If Russia is not defeated in the first six months,' he thought, 'she will never be defeated at all.' So the troops were sent, and he f[illegible]owed their movements with an [illegible]tention that, for days on end, wholly absorbed him. Their activities were, upon his in[illegible]uctions, [illegible]eported in the most minute d[illegible]in the Press, and whatever co[illegible]nterpreted as a success was as [illegible]ressed as German successes were deprecated. The news that the Germans were coming up against stronger Russian resistance at Minsk delighted him. 'I hope for only one thing,' he said, 'that in this war in the east the Germans will lose a lot of feathers. It is false to speak of an anti-Bolshevik struggle. Hitler knows that Bolshevism has been non-existent for some time. No code protects private property like the Russian civil code. He ought rather to say that, with fifty-two ton tanks, he wants to vanquish a great continental power that was getting ready to settle accounts with him.'

As the summer progressed and news of German victories in Russia contrasted with reports of Italian defeats in Ethiopia, Mussolini became increasingly anti-German. Occasionally he gave vent to his dislike of the British who had robbed him of his Empire, a loss for which, so he said, he had 'sworn hatred against the British for all time, bequeathing his hatred to all Italians'. But it was the Germans that principally occupied his thoughts, the Germans who 'insist upon the loyalty of others, but are themselves incapable of being loyal.' 'Note it down in your diary,' he told Ciano that I f[illegible] unavoidable conflict arisi[illegible] Italy and Germany . . . [illegible] instinct, and I now s[illegible] whether a British victo[illegible] be more desirable fo[illegible] than a German victory [illegible]e to fight the [illegible] uphold the m[illegible] [illegible]ity.'

'We must place thousands of guns along the rivers in th[illegible]n of Venice,' he said another [illegible]use it is from there that th[illegible]will launch their invasion [illegible] . . . For the time being th[illegible]hing that can be done. We are [illegible]this road, and we must stay on it. But we must hope for two things: that the war will be long and exhausting for Germany, and that it may end in a compromise that will save our independence.' 'We can do nothing against Germany for the time being,' he mused a few weeks later, returning to a by now most familiar theme. 'We must bide our time. It is a country that no one can vanquish militarily, but it will collapse through lack of internal equilibrium. For us it is a question of holding out and waiting until this happens.'

Anti-German harangues were interspersed with condemnations of his own countrymen, particularly the Generals. 'I have little faith in our Italian race,' he wrote. 'At the first bombing that might destroy a famous campanile or a painting by Giotto, the Italians would go into a fit of artistic sentimentality and would raise their hands in surrender. We must thank Graziani; it is to him we owe it if our prestige is declining; and, as a matter of fact, it is already half gone. When the war is over he will no longer be Marshal of Italy.'

After the heavy Allied air attacks on Naples he professed himself glad that the city was having such severe nights: 'The breed will harden; the war will make of the Neapolitans a Nordic race.' But the present Neapolitan was no good for war. War [illegible]ired hardness and ruthlessness. [illegible]as only o[illegible]general, he [illegible]ho kne[illegible]e it and [illegible] troo[illegible] [illegible]all very [illegible] Here you can [illegible]ving, murder [illegible]d rape.'

[illegible]n August Mussolini left for [illegible]

ssolini at Hitler's headquarters
e Eastern Front

headquarters on the Eastern Front to make a tour of the Russian battlefields, and his jealousy of Hitler, and the obvious superiority of the German army over the Italian was once more strongly stressed. As always in these wartime meetings with the Führer, the Duce remained quiet judging it opportune, as the Italian official record tactfully phrased it, 'to allow [illegible] Führer to develop his propositions quite freely'. Upon one occasion Hitler made such liberal use of this freedom that he went on talking for two and a half hours without stopping. Mussolini's relief when it was time to leave for the front was obvious.

Dino Alfieri, the Italian Ambassador, travelled in Ribbentrop's car which followed a short distance behind Hitler's so he had 'an excellent view of the Führer and Mussolini. They frequently conversed and every so often Hitler would stretch out his arm to indicate the direction of his Army's victorious advance.' At Tekucha, General Giovanni Messe, commander of the Italian Expeditionary Force, met them and escorted them to the Turin Division wh[illegible]ed the Tagliamente Legio[illegible]k-shirts. 'The soldiers w[illegible]r[illegible]lly shaved, their uniforms [illegible] good condition and their vehicles were spotless . . . their weapons looked spick and span . . . Mussolini, however, looked far from satisfied. He would have liked to show Hitler a division looking battle-scarred . . . The parade passed off by no means smoothly.' The lorries skidded giddily on the mud-covered road, and 'on the sides of the lorries the names of the firms from which they had been requisitioned gave the spectacle an air of improvization . . . The parade of a large detachment of Bersaglieri was scarcely more impressive. In order to retain their balance the riders were compelled to dangle their legs and drag their feet.'

To make matters worse, the German troops, in contrast, looked tough and aggressive and when Hitler went up to talk with them and to get them to laugh at his jokes, Mussolini was left with Field Marshal von Rundstedt. 'Hitler might have taken me with him when he went to speak to the troops,' he later commented irritably to Alfieri, 'instead of leaving me with

Below: Mussolini and Hitler tour the Eastern Front. _Left:_ Mussolini with General Messe, commander of the Italian Expeditionary Force in Russia

old R[illegible]stedt. Did you notice how uns[illegible] the Führer looked when he [illegible]gst his men?'

O[illegible]urn journey, Mussolini enj[illegible] moments of superiority when [illegible]ok over the controls of the aircraft from Bauer, Hitler's pilot, as though to demonstrate that there was at least one thing he could do which the Führer could not. 'All the time Mussolini was sitting in Bauer's seat – and incidentally Bauer never left his side–' Alfieri observed, 'Hitler stared anxiously at the second pilot as if to ensure that the proximity of the Duce was not distracting his attention. And when, half an hour later, Mussolini returned to his original seat the Führer was so relieved that he could not refrain from congratulating him.'

'Don't forget to mention that for a considerable part of the way I piloted th[illegible] Führer's four-engined plane myself,' he afterwards instructed Alfieri when giving him directives for a long Stefani report up[illegible] the various incidents [illegible]f the trip. Smiling broadly, he [illegible] at the Ambassador with an [illegible]ssion of childlike contentment[illegible]

As Mussolini continued with his brief, the train in which he was travelling home through Germany passed several villages in which the people had gathered outside their houses in the hope of seeing him. At each village he would suddenly break off, leave his seat, cross to one side of the carriage, then to the other, smiling and waving at the people through the window, although Alfieri doubted that they could possibly have recognised him, so fast was the

December 1942, Italian troops again in retreat, this time from the Eastern Front. German successes and repeated Italian failures now preyed on Mussolini's mind

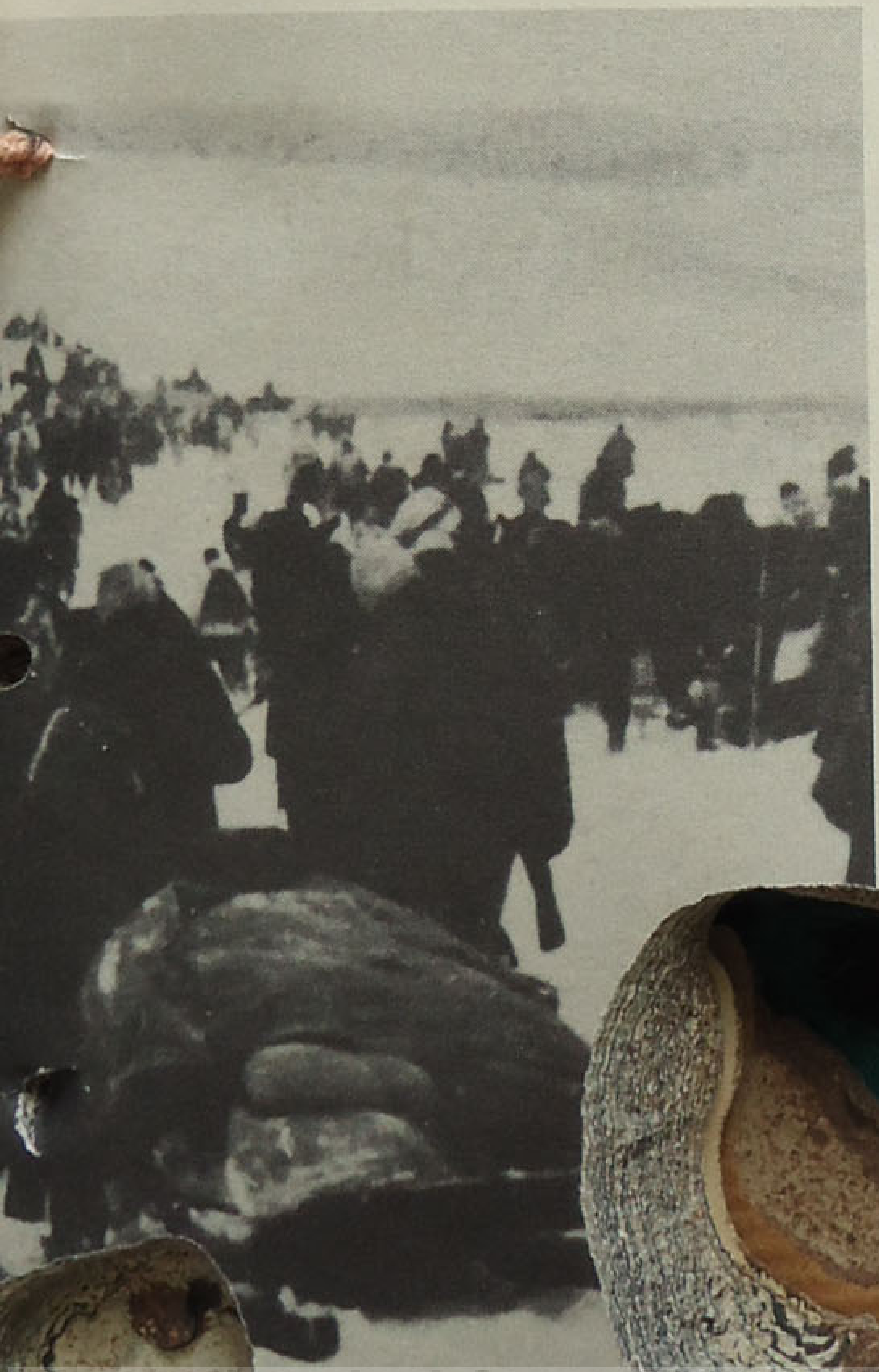
train going.

All the way back to Italy, Mussolini's cheerful mood persisted. He was pleased with the official communiqué by means of which the War aims of the Axis Powers – the removal of the causes of previous wars and the elimination of the Bolshevik menace an[illegible] capitalist exploitation – had be[illegible]ounced as a counter-blast to [illegible]ently published Anglo-American [illegible]antic Charter. He was gratified, too, by the way Hitler had bade him farewell, had repeated his assurances of satisfaction and friendship and had clasped his hand tightly in both his own.

He returned home convinced that the 'uneasiness of the Italian people' was due to the fact that they were 'not participating in the war on the Russian front on a larger scale.' He decided that he would send another twenty divisions to Russia in the spring. 'In this way our war effort will compare favourably with G[illegible]ny's, and will prevent Germa[illegible] the moment of final victory [illegible]ta-ting to us as she will to [illegible]red peoples.' This was a fa[illegible]eme of his. 'More soldiers,' [illegible]ated, 'more soldiers and less workers.'

It was, therefore, peculiarly painful to him that the Italian workers in Germany were so derided and, on occasions ill-treated by their hosts, or – as the Germans considered themselves – their masters. There were reports of their being beaten in their camps, of their being guarded by watchdogs trained to bite the legs of those guilty of even slight misdemeanours. 'These things are bound to produce a lasting hatred in my heart,' Mussolini said. 'I can wait for years, many years even; but in the end I shall square this account. I will not permit the sons of a race which has given to humanity Caesar, Dante and Michelangelo to be devoured by the bloodhounds of the huns.'

Yet when Mussolini visited Hitler again in April 1942 the treatment of Italian workers in Germany was not discussed. Instead the conference followed a by now only too familiar pattern which Ciano vividly recorded in his diary: 'Hitler talks, talks, talks, talks. Mussolini suffers – he, who is in the habit of talking himself, and who, instead, has to remain practically silent. On the second day, after lunch, when everything had already been said, Hitler talked uninterruptedly for an hour and forty minutes. He omitted absolutely no argument: war and peace, religion and philosophy, art and history. Mussolini automatically looked at [illegible]t-watch; I h[illegible]mind on my [illegible] who is [illegible]iness a[illegible] He w[illegible]tended [illegible]menon[illegible] the co[illegible]ntinu[illegible] [illegible]proval [illegible] have to end[illegible], and I am [illegible]ain there [illegible] gesture, a word, [illegible] pause which they don't kn[illegible] [illegible]art. General Jodl, after [illegible]



struggle, finally went to sleep on the div[illegible]tel was yawning, but he su[illegible]n keeping his head up. H[illegible]lose to Hitler to let himse[illegible]would have like to do.'

D[illegible]ler's boring loquacity, however, Mussolini was once again reinvigorated by his genius and confidence; and he returned home to Italy – as he always did return after a visit to the Führer – entirely satisfied with the progress of the war, and determined to prosecute it with increased energy. Soon after his arrival back in Rome, he left for a week's military inspections in Sardinia and was further encouraged by the situation he found there. He talked with enthusaism of the troops and of the Sardinian people, from whom, so he said with profound satisfactio he had not heard one plea for pea nor any protests about the scarci of bread, a scarcity which had led the most disgraceful scenes of rioti on the Italian mainland and to th *carabinieri* having to disperse by g fire a mob of women that broke i the Fascist Party Headquarters Matera. The armame[illegible]nd equipment in Sardinia w[illegible]efficien as the troops, he we[illegible] complacently. There could be no question of a successful Allied invasion, and even if troops did manage to get ashore the prevalence of malaria in all the possible invasion zones was such that the British forces would be decimated within a few days, 'just as those of Frederick Barbarossa were decimated when they halted between Portonaccio and Ponte Galera'.

In his newly-found confidence, Mussolini became increasingly bomb-

Another attempt at decisive action – this time in Malta, bombed here by Italian planes

astic and increasingly ruthless in his orders and pronouncements. When it came to his ears that a dance had been held at the Roman Villa of Contessa Genni, whose husband was serving with the Italian Army in North Africa, and that a young secretary from the American Embassy had been present, he had several of the guests arrested and some of them, including the Contessa herself, were handcuffed. 'The first to thank me should be her husband,' Mussolini commented, 'because, while he was fighting, this flibbertigibbet was receiving the enemy in her home and dancing with them.' When the Italian navy agreed that some British hospital ships might go to Malta for the relief of the wounded, Mussolini vetoed the suggestion on the grounds that many things other than medical supplies and doctors might get through, just as, during the previous winter, some timely supplies of petrol had been landed at Benghazi in s[illegible] the Italian Red Cross. And w[illegible]ard the case of a man wh[illegible]ded military service, he [illegible] to have the culprit 'shot [illegible] daylight in front of the Coliseum as if he had been a murderer'.

In this fierce mood, Mussolini spoke menacingly of an imminent assault upon Malta, hinting darkly of 'a surprise for the taking of the island' which would 'give formidable results', which he, as Commander-in-Chief, would direct, but of which no one other than himself ever learned the nature. Above all, he spoke with keen anticipation of the forthcoming offensive in Libya, a front which had been too quiet for his taste for a considerable time.

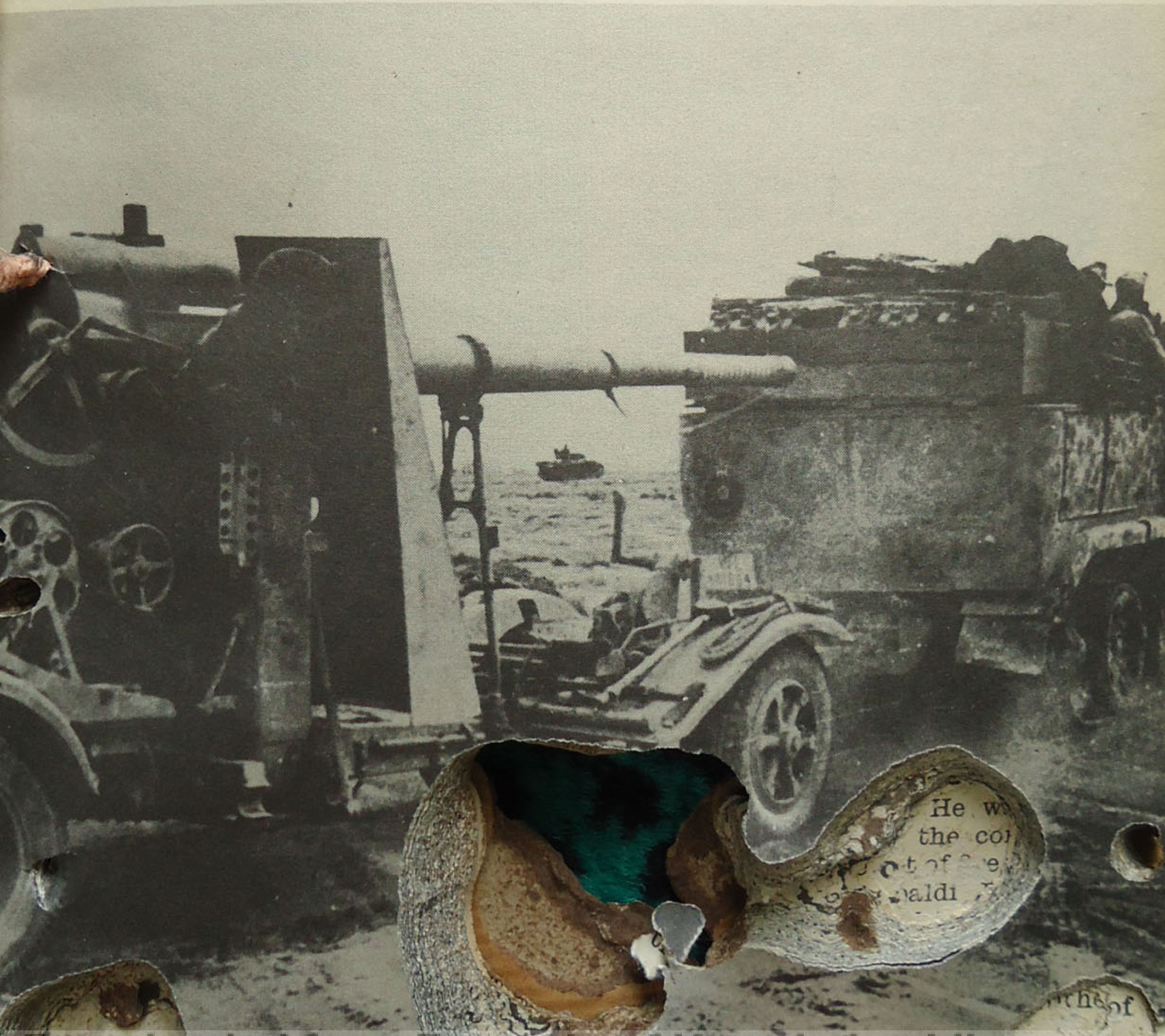
Valetta, Malta ; the damaged Opera House bears witness to Italian bombing

Hitler's satellite

Libyan troops squat in a makeshift trench before going into the attack

The advent of General Rommel in North Africa had had its expected results: soon after his arrival he had struck forcefully at the Allied positions; he had force[illegible]is enemies to abandon Benghazi and to retreat to Tobruk; he had destroyed the 2nd [illegible]moured Division, and, within less than a fort[illegible]ht, had not only inflicted h[illegible]osses on the British forces b[illegible] recaptured much of the terri[illegible]hich had been won by General O'Connor. To Mussolini's natural chagrin, the credit for this early and brilliant victory had gone entirely to Rommel and the German divisions under his command, although no less than two thirds of his force were Italian. Then, at the end of 1941, when the Allies counterattacked, forcing Rommel to withdraw, to abandon great numbers of [illegible]and prisoners, to evacuate Cy[illegible]nd to allow the enemy to re[illegible]k, which he had so dogg[illegible] to capture for so long, the [illegible]this reverse were seen more to [illegible] with the Italian troops in his army, and with the reconstituted British command, than with any defects in his own leadership.

Now, as Rommel prepared for his new offensive, to recapture Tobruk and to drive the British back across the Egyptian frontier, Mussolini was determined that the Italian divisions should be given their due credit and that he himself should share to the



German artillery in North Africa

full in that credit by appearing on the bat[illegible] at the moment of victory as [illegible] failed to do in Greece.

[illegible] advance began on 26th Ma[illegible] the going was hard and sava[illegible]ested; but the Duce was confident. He spoke optimistically of a new and more successful siege of Tobruk, of a push to Mersa Matru He watched the progress of the Ax forces with even more eagerness tha he had watched the movements of th Italian Expeditionary Force in Ru sia, trying to decide when to leave fo the front, dreading the prospect tha he might arrive too late and th merely be seen to [illegible] making attempt to appropriat[illegible] laurels o the victors, yet fea[illegible]at if he arrived too early he [illegible] becom

Solidarity with the Axis powers is demonstrated by some of the inhabitants of North Africa

implicated in a defeat with those useless generals of his. He would not like, he admitted, a repetition of what had happened in Albania when they had made him 'a witness of an unfortunate battle'. However, he decided, when Tobruk fell, he would go. Tobruk fell towards the end of June, and Romme[illegible] quickly followed up his success, [illegible]ng across the frontier on 23rd [illegible] spersing the British at Mersa [illegible]h and advancing towards El Alamein. General Auchinlek, who had replaced Wavell [illegible]d to the front to take comma[illegible]on; but Rommel appeared i[illegible] The advance into Egypt co[illegible]

On 29th June Mus[illegible] for Libya. He had been awaiting a telegram from Cavallero with the single word '*Tevere*', an assurance that the Italian command was certain that the Axis advance would continue right up to the Suez Canal. The telegram had arrived on the 27th, but a cyclone had prevented his departure for two days; and when he did arrive it was only to realise that the impetus of the attack had been lost, that things were not now going as well as Cavallero had prophesied, and that 'even Rommel's strategy had its ups and downs'. Later, in his *Storia di un anno*, he gave the date 28th June 1942 as the turning-point of the war and of his own career. Nevertheless, for the moment he indulged his illusions of a quick victory; he even entered into discussions with the Germans about the future political government of Egypt, agreeing with evident reluctance that Rommel would be military governor and his delegate an Italian civilian.

Everywhere he went in North Africa, people spoke of Rommel until the name sickened him. The Germans spoke of him constantly with admiration; the Italians spoke of him with resentment. It particularly incensed the Italian generals that the German commander had written disparagingly in a despatch of the performance of the Italian Sabratha Division of which they and Mussolini were exceptionally proud. Mussolini declared that he would 'never forgive' Rommel for his [illegible]ks in this despatch; but when [illegible] them to [illegible]e to co[illegible]t defer- [illegible]he let[illegible] phrase [illegible] its [illegible] you [illegible]onour of [illegible]rewa[illegible]ory, Rommel [illegible] longer, in the Duce's opinion 'one [illegible] the great military leaders [illegible] of

Above: Grim-faced, Mussolini inspects troops in Alexandria. *Below:* Field-Marshal Rommel with Mussolini in North Africa. Rommel won the acclaim that the Duce had hoped would go to him. *Right:* Rommel with his aides during the desert campaign

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Mareth Line
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ALGERIA
Tripoli
El Agheila
Benghazi
Derna
Tobruk
Sidi Barrani
El Alamein
Cairo
Port Said
Suez Canal
LIBYA
EGYPT
8 NOVEMBER 1942 ALLIED TROOPS LAND HERE
CAPTURED BY ALLIES 23 JANUARY 1943
BRITISH DRIVE WEST 23-24 OCTOBER 1942
300
480
etres
KEY
Allied movements.

African campaign

time b[illegible] madman' – was promoted Field[illegible]al; and Mussolini retaliated [illegible]oting Cavallero a Marshal[illegible]ugh he had no high opini[illegible] talents of his Chief of the Ge[illegible]aff, who, as Ciano said, 'would bow to the public lavatories if that would advance him', and who had remained in the Duce's good graces only because of his blithe optimism, his readiness to exaggerate successes and minimise failures whenever occasion demanded.

The three weeks that Mussolini spent in Libya were among the most unhappy of his life. Rommel did not even deign to visit him, and he was forced to trail about behind the lines – he never visited the front – followed by dispirited Italian generals, listening to their complaints. He spoke to them of the increased supplies that would shortly be crossing the Mediterranean, of the great victories shortly to be expected in Russia, of the plans that were being prepared for the capture of Malta. They attended to him respectfully, repeating '*Si Duce . . . Si Duce, e vero Duce . . . Il Duce ha ragione . . .*' But they knew in their hearts that it was not true, that the Duce was not right; and he returned to Rome, infected by their discouragement.

His stomach pains had returned; his ulcer was more troublesome than ever; he looked desperately tired and ill. It was announced that the exhaustion caused by his strenuous duties had brought on an attack of amoebic dysentery. He was taken to Rocca delle Caminate, his country home in the north which had been presented to him in happier times. A rumour flew [illegible]nd Rome t[illegible] had gone [illegible] 'Perha[illegible] dying,' [illegible]nister [illegible] [illegible]t no[illegible] [illegible]mmon[illegible] humiliat[illegible]

Guiseppe [illegible] Education, had [illegible] [illegible]erent theo[illegible] According to him, Italo Balbo w[illegible] right to have called Mussolini 'a product of syphilis', though in the past he had objected to the words. 'I wonder now if this judgment on Mussolini wasn't correct, or at least very close to the truth,' Bottai confided in Ciano. 'The Duce has decayed intellectually and physically. He doesn't attract me any more. He is not a man of action; he [illegible] presumptuous and ambitious an[illegible]ts only to be admired, flattered [illegible]rayed.'

Certainly, after 194[illegible] Mussolini grew erratic in his judgments, increasingly prone to sudden, unpredictable changes of mood, increasingly inconsistent in his loyalties and tastes. One day he would prophesy the imminent collapse of the Allies; the next he would speak of a war that was to last at least another five years. Sometimes he would totally disregard the importance of the United States of America, whose probable intervention in the war he had long dismissed as unlikely if not impossible and against whom he had declared war, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, in a short speech that might as well have served for a declaration of war against Nicaragua. At other times he would speak morosely of American power and influence.

Upon occasion he would fulsomely praise his favourite formations in the Italian Army – 'The Tridentina Division is superb. I affirm without hesitation that there are no more perfect soldiers in Europe'. Upon other occasions he would condemn the entire armed forces of the country and ask how it was possible that any good fighting men could come from [illegible]ce – 'The Italian race is a [illegible]p. Eighteen years are not [illegible]hange them. It takes a [illegible]ps 180 centuries.'

[illegible] he would take it into [illegible]sue a decree. At the end [illegible]942 a decree was promul[illegible] mobilization of [illegible] [illegible]teen and fifty-[illegible] [illegible]he time that it [illegible] the women next.

the decree had been issued, he appeared to lose all interest in it, and never bothered to ensure that it was carried out. In April, seeing what he considered to be far too many young men strolling about in the streets of the capital, he gave orders that they must all be conscripted into the army immediately. The order was received and re[illegible] by the appropriate depart[illegible]nd then quietly forgotten.

Ministers grew accustomed to the Duce becoming momentarily but passionately absorbed in some matter of the most trivial concern. For a time it seemed, for instance, that Mussolini could think of nothing but the abolition of the Christmas holiday which 'only reminded one of the birth of a Jew who gave the world debilitating and devitalizing theories, and who especially contrived to [illegible] Italy through the disintegrat[illegible]er of the Popes'. Newspapers [illegible]ibited even to mention Chr[illegible]ough the people celebrated [illegible]val in the same way that they always had in the past. At another time, Mussolini appeared principally concerned with the correct method of performing the Fascist salute and reproached those ministers who failed to give it according to the approved regulations.

With so unstable a leader, it was scarcely surprising that the organization of the Italian Fascist war machine was so eccentric; that boys of eighteen found themselves shipped overseas on the very day of their mobilization without even so much

Guiseppe Bottai, the Italian Minister of Education. By 1942, Bottai commented, the Duce had decayed intellectually and physically

as being told what a firearm was; that [illegible]rmaments factories produc[illegible]than half the material whi[illegible]lini had been promised; tha[illegible]n the Commander-in-Chie[illegible]re how many divisions were ava[illegible]ble let alone their exact locations; that although almost all provisions, including bread, vegetables, meat, rice and eggs were rationed, the police had been forced to abandon all attempts at interfering with the extensive black market since a Government decree had ineptly endeavoured to cure the problem by cutting all prices by twenty per cent.

To Mussolini the most galling of all his trials was the growing dependence of Italy upon Germany, the repeated hints from Berlin that Italy was not so much a help to Germany now as a positive hindrance. He was obliged to give up his so fondly treasured plans of capturing Malta when Hitler implied that it could not be taken now owing to the uncertain state of Italian morale. He was similarly obliged to accept heavy cuts in the shipment of oil and coal from Germany and Rumania, since to continue the supplies would, as a German attaché at the Embassy in Rome brutally put it, be merely throwing 'good oil after bad'. The Germans also declined to fulfil their commitments to supply steel and other essential military supplies. 'Among Italy's cemeteries,' Mussolini commented, 'I shall some day build the most important of all, one in which to bury German promises. They have delivered nothing, or almost nothing, of what they promised. So I have persuaded Cavallero not to ask for the anti-tank guns and the anti-aircraft guns for ou[illegible]sions going [illegible]a. I prefe[illegible] the risk [illegible]welve b[illegible] from th[illegible]' On[illegible] [illegible]e bla[illegible] which '[illegible] the reso[illegible] which he w[illegible]ost t[illegible] physically exterminated'. [illegible]e than all this, there w[illegible]tain

continued reports of the contemp[illegible]uous and cruel treatment of the Italian workers in Germany whose plight was such that before the end of 1942 it w[illegible] decided that no more would be sent. There were also reports from Russia of the commanders of German units appropriating all avai[illegible]able transport and le[illegible]ing Italia[illegible] formations to retreat o[illegible] through the snow.

Mussolini had to fac[illegible]ct that the Germans were not only losing confidence in the Italian will to fight, not only treating Italians as though they were already enemies rather than allies, but that it had been decided in Berlin that steps must be taken by the Wehrmacht to provide against the possibility of an Italian collapse. Several German units entered Italy ostensibly for 'training'; and Field Marshal Albert Kesselring assumed the command of all joint combat forces operating in Italy – as Rommel had done in North Africa – with the title Commander-in-Chief, South.

Mussolini was left in no doubt as to what Kesselring's staff thought of their allies, as their telephone calls to Berlin were tapped and he was handed transcripts of the conversations in which the Italians were referred to as 'macaroni' and in which hopes were expressed that Italy would soon become an occupied country. From other intercepted messages, it became clear that plans for the military occupation of the country were, in fact, well advanced and that they included, in the event of Mussolini proving recalcitrant, the establishment of a puppet government under the nominal leadership of the solidly [illegible]an Former Secretary-General [illegible]e Fascist Party, Roberto [illegible]nown as the Streicher of [illegible]

[illegible]hans did not trouble to [illegible]r preference for such a [illegible]Mussolini was con[illegible]ered [illegible]and lenient. For [illegible] the Italians to[illegible] [illegible]escribed as 'extr[illegible]

Field-Marshal Albert Kesselring. As German confidence in the Ita[illegible] ed, effectiveness as a fighting [illegible] he assumed command of a [illegible] combat forces operating [illegible]

Downloaded from Fount[illegible] of Knowledge Library

in their treatment of the [illegible], and when bombs were throw[illegible]alian troops by dissident C[illegible] he spoke darkly of savag[illegible]s on the German method, [illegible] not for a moment supposed [illegible] would carry out his threat. Moreover by October 1942 Mussolini was seriously ill. Bottai described him as ‘grey, ashy, with sunken cheeks, troubled and tired eyes and his mouth revealing a sense of bitterness . . . humiliated, sad and unable to struggle against his advancing years. It is distressing to one who has loved him and, despite all, still loves him. One would like to take his hands and speak to him. But he is no longer the man he was. The road to an exchange of confidences has been barred.’

Since his return from Libya he had lost three stones in weight; and sometimes the pain in his stomach grew so bad that he had to press his hands against his mouth to prevent himself screaming. On occasions, so the Chief Usher at Palazzo Venezia said, he would abandon all restraint and throw himself to the floor, rolling about in agony. For a time it was feared that he might be suffering from something more serious than severe duodenal ulcers. Professor Cesare Frugoni, one of Italy’s leading doctors, who at first had diagnosed acute dysentery, now believed that the patient was suffering from advanced cancer. The other doctors disagreed. Meanwhile Mussolini was placed on a mainly liquid diet, which made him anaemic, and he continued to suffer.

Both Bottai and Mussolini’s daughter, Edda, Ciano’s wife, thought that a complicating factor was his continued [illegible]oon visits to [illegible] last of his long [illegible] mistress[illegible]a Petacci, [illegible] He w[illegible]n apart- [illegible]he ha[illegible]

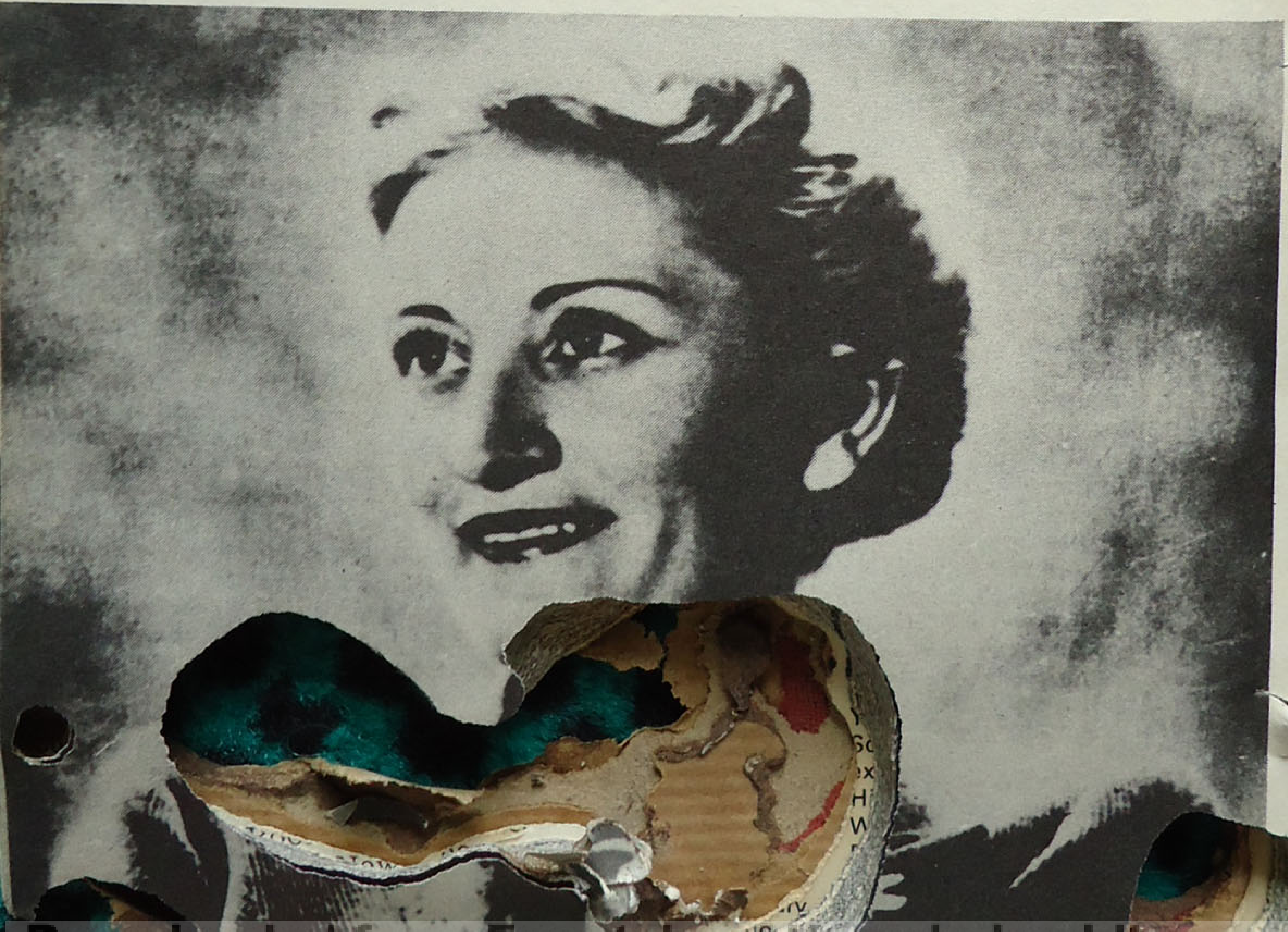
[illegible] ie [illegible] puppet [illegible] Mussolini [illegible]vernment in [illegible] [illegible]ected a German occupation which [illegible] would be headed by Farinacci ment on [illegible] upper floor of the Palazzo Venezi[illegible] although he frequently quarr[illegible]h her now, often abused her a[illegible]mes hit her, he could not do[illegible]er; and his notorious protecti[illegible]er unpopular, grasping family, and their undesirable hangers-on, was one of the main reasons for the declining esteem in which his people hold him.

Yet he appeared largely unaware of this decline, for he rarely went out among the people now; his Ministers dared not talk to him critically; and the newspapers printed only such news as he thought suitable for Italians to read; those that referred to unpleasant topics, such as queues and shortages and hunger had, like *Oggi*, been suppressed.

Several leading Fascists approached Ciano and told him that, as the Duce's closest adviser and son-in-law, it was his duty to warn him about the feeling in the country, the resentment that had been caused by the appointment of an unworthy young protégé of the Petaccis', Aldo Vidussoni, to the important post of Secretary of the [illegible]arty, and by the scandalous behaviour of Claretta Petacci's brother, Marcello, who had become involved in an illicit traffic in gold with the compli[illegible]y of the Minister of the Interior a[illegible] Ministry of Foreign Exchang[illegible]Ciano dared not; and, anyway, [illegible]t good would it do, he asked in exasperation, when two of the Duce's most trusted colleagues, his private secretary, De Cesare, and his Under-Secretary of the Interior, Guido Buffarini-Guidi, were making plenty of money in this 'underworld setting'?

So the Italian tragedy continued, and opposition to the war and to the Fascist régime grew ever more widespread as outspoken working-men and intellectuals were arrested, police fired over the heads of strikers and rioters, Allied bombers intensified their attacks on Italian towns, the

Edda Ciano, Mussolini's daughter



people went hungry, and almost everyone agreed that they would do anything to end the senseless war – they would even try to win it. Shutting his mind to what reports o[illegible]he country's unrest reached him, Mussolini devoted a large part of his time to the manipulation of newspapers, altering the style o[illegible]content of the daily war bulletin[illegible]re it was broadcast, re-phra[illegible]adlines, inventing victories, [illegible]ggerating the activities of the army that when a company of parachutists, numbering 150 men, occupied one of the Ionian Islands, he gave it out that an entire division had landed there.

When not engaged in such activities, Mussolini harangued his visitors, vilifying his enemies, condemning those whom he blamed for Italy's failure. The generals were 'paralytic'; the admirals were even worse; the bourgeoisie were 'decadent'; the people were 'a mediocre race of good-for-nothings, capable only of singing and eating ice-cream'. As for the Germans, they were 'uncouth barbarians', 'untrustworthy[illegible]ugs', 'primitive degenerates'. [illegible]ould remember,' he said r[illegible]to a theme that obsesse[illegible]that through them we have [illegible]mpire. I have a thorn in my heart, because the defeated French still have their Empire, while we have lost ours . . . We may be willing to give up our shirts, but the Germans remove even our hides.' Hitler was just a 'big jackass'; so was Roosevelt; they belonged to kindred races.

While he was in the midst of one of these harangues, Mussolini learned that the British army's new commander in North Africa, General Montgomery, had broken through the Axis front at El Alamein. He accepted the defeat which had indeed been long expected, with that stern, calm stoicism which he was still capable of

Claretta Petacci – the last in a long line of Mussolini's mistresses installed at the Palazzo Venezia

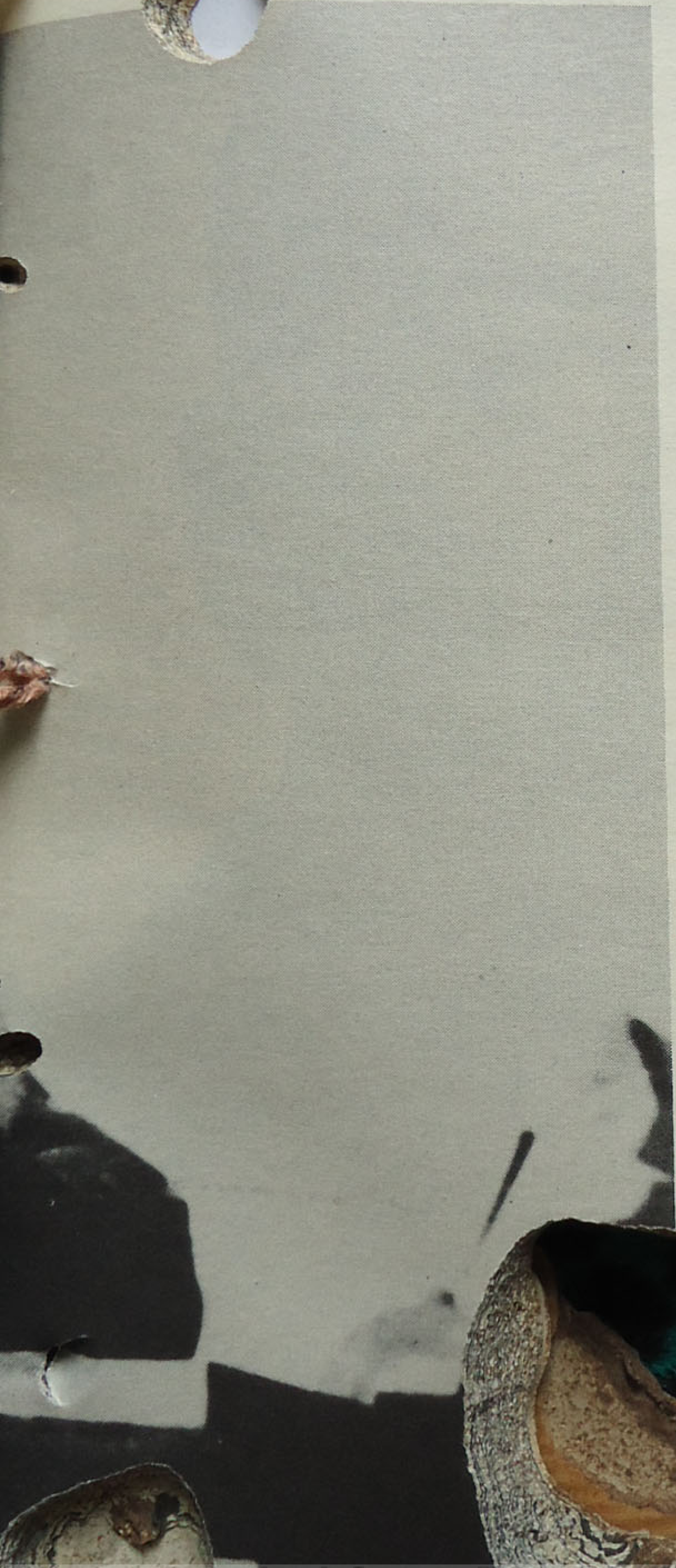
displaying in moments of crisis. The loss o[illegible] might even be an advantage, [illegible]ined, 'because this region has [illegible]r merchant fleet and we can [illegible]r concentrate on the defenc[illegible]y itself'.

Two days later the need to concentrate on this defence seemed more urgent than either he or the Germans had expected when the Americans landed in Algiers. Although Muss[illegible]ini had so recently dismissed the American entry into the war as of little moment, he realised that the moral repercussions throughout Italy of their landi[illegible] in North Africa were 'immediate[illegible]rofound

General Montgomery during the advance to El Alamein

. . . Every enemy of Fascism promptly reared his head. The first of the traitors emerged from the shadows.'

The Germans now became more concerned than ever ab[illegible] the dangers of an Italian collapse. Göring and Rommel both came to Rome to endeavour to persuade their Allies to adopt a m[illegible]e positive attitude towards th[illegible] and mobilisation, but all they succeeded in doing, as Rommel put it, 'was to [illegible] their backs up without getti[illegible]hing put right . . . Many Ital[illegible] very deeply that the Axis w[illegible] and consequently believed [illegible] final victory we should have scant regard for their interests. It was generally felt that if Tripolitania were lost, Mussolini would be threatened by a political crisis in Italy . . . A great many Italians had had enough of the war, and were wondering how best they could get out of it.'



Hitler thought it essential that Mussolini should be given another injection of those confident spirits that only he could provide; but the Duce, pleading that his health was in so precarious a state that a visit to Germany was for the moment out of the question, replied that the situation could best be saved by a German withdrawal from Russia and a concentration of Axis forces in the Mediterranean. This solution was far from being to the taste of the Führer who proclaimed his ability to win the war on all fronts, even now.

The Duce, who had no reason to share this confidence, was forced to realise that the Axis defeat in North Africa and the loss of Libya were closely bound up with his own political future; that both inside and outside the Party, men were discussing his ability to survive the storm, even the desirability of his survival and means of 'removing' him. There were rumours that Cavallero, Grandi, Bottai and Farinacci all had ambitions to succeed him.

Mussolini did not take the threats too seriously, however; and when he [illegible]e showed that he had entirely [illegible]stood th[illegible]e. He re- [illegible] taking [illegible]d the [illegible]lf from Fo[illegible] to th[illegible] of office [illegible]le merely [illegible]rring [illegible] most active [illegible]ics from one Ministry to another. [illegible]vallero was replaced as Ch[illegible]of

General Vittorio Ambrosio. He replaced Cavallero as Chief of the General Staff

the General Staff by General Vittorio Ambrosio, a man most deeply implicated in the plots against him, and a man thoroughly distrusted by Kesselring. As Bottai remark[illegible] it seemed that the Duce had only been trying to distract attention 'from the great question marks of the hour and to display his [illegible]wer over men'.

In a r[illegible] effort to bolster up Mussoli[illegible]fidence and to satisfy himself t[illegible]ano had not been sent to the Vatican to negotiate a separate peace, Hitler repeated his request that the Duce should visit Germany. This time, though still suffering from spasmodic pain, Mussolini agreed to go. He went with marked reluctance because he feared the Germans would despise him for travelling with a doctor and with a cook to prepare his special foods; he did not want 'a lot of ravenous Germans' to make jokes about his rice and milk.

He was sick several times on the journey and when he got out of the train in Germany the Führer, so Goebbels said, 'thought that he looked like a broken old man'. Later, remarking upon his depression and listlessness, he expressed a doubt to Admiral Doenitz that the Duce was really determined 'to carry on to the end'.

During the conference Mussolini apparently made a few comments about the need for a withdrawal from Russia, for the return of troops to the Mediterranean to defend the Italian homeland, for more economic aid from Germany. But Hitler declined to consider such propositions; he was, in Alfieri's words, 'dominated and obsessed by his fanatical idea to defeat Russia', and would listen to [illegible] ments that tended to inte[illegible] this aim. While Mussoli[illegible] to think about the effec[illegible] German onslaught in R[illegible] Italian troops in Tuni[illegible] conti[illegible]d with his endless [illegible]oses, and the Du[illegible] [illegible]e with him.

[illegible]nd of the confere[illegible] ever Mussolini's spirits were at least partially restored. Hitler [illegible]atulated himself that he had [illegible]ore transformed the 'broke[illegible]an' into one 'in high fettle [illegible] for anything'. The Duce no[illegible]stood there could 'be no salvation for him' other than to win or die with Germany.

On his return to Rome he behaved in characteristic fashion. He issued instructions for a concentration camp to be built for anti-Fascists; he dismissed both the Chief of Police and the Secretary of the Party; to Bottai he muttered menacingly, 'They spread it about that I'm finished, fading away, done for. Well, they'll see –' On the anniversary of the entry of Italian troops into Addis Ababa, he made a fiery speech from the balcony of the Palazzo Venezia, ending with the stirring words: 'I hear vibrating in your voices the proclamation of your old and incorruptible faith. The bloody sacrifices of these hard times will be rewarded by victory. That is true, just as it is true God is just and that Italy is immortal.'

But it was the last speech the Duce was ever to make from that place hallowed by so many appeals to the spirit of Fascism. Requests for German air support to save Tunisia were disregarded in Berlin, and on 8th May, three days after his speech from Palazzo Venezia was made, Tunis and Bizerta fell. On 15th May the remnants of the Axis forces in Tunisia surrendered; and on 9th July, having taken the Islands of Pantelleria and Lampedusa, the Allies landed in Sicily.

As the dispirited Italian defenders retreated, leaving the Germans to [illegible] Sicily as best they could, [illegible] to inform [illegible]ote to M[illegible] He w[illegible]peared [illegible]y that [illegible] the co[illegible]ans to [illegible] int[illegible] would [illegible]aldi [illegible]oops to [illegible] was astonished by the [illegible] tone of the [illegible]sage; but Mussolini replied to it [illegible]dly enough and suggested [illegible] a

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meeting might be profitable.

Hitler agreed and the meeting took place at a villa at Feltre on the southern slopes of the Dolomites. It was their thirteenth meeting and, as Rintelen, the German military attaché in Rome recorded, it was not a propitious one. 'Over the airfield lay a leaden weariness which could not be solely attributed to the heat.'

As us[illegible] [illegible]er talked and talked. Mussolin[illegible] 'cross-legged on the edge of his armchair, which was too big and too deep for him, and listened patiently and impassively, clasping his hands on his knees' as the Führer insisted on a vigorous fight in both Italy and Russia until victory had been won. He rudely contrasted the spirit in Germany where fifteen-year-old boys were fighting in anti-aircraft batteries, with the situation in Italy where much more [illegible]istic methods would have to be [illegible]ted, where the Government [illegible]ded insufficient respect, where [illegible]ism was rampant, where [illegible] and traitors would have to be shot, where the only solution lay in placing all Italian forces under German command.

The Duce, rubbing his mouth with back of his hand and mopping the sweat from his face with a handkerchief, did not respond. Indeed it seems that he only spoke twice during the entire meeting. On the first occasion it was to correct a statement that had been made about the population of Corsica, and, on the second, it was to announce, after a secretary had handed him a message, 'At this moment the enemy is carrying out a heavy air attack on Rome.'

Yet afterwards, when Ambrosio offered him some advice in private, he burst out angrily, in a voice 'trembling with emotion', 'Can you really suppose that I've not been tortured by the same thoughts as you? Behind my mask of impassivity I am in an agony of spirit. But if we detach ourselves from Germany, what then? One day at a specified hour we broadcast a message to the enemy. What would happen? They would demand, quite justly, our capitulation. But can we give up so easily twenty years' work and abandon the realization of all our hopes? And what do you think Hitler will do? Do you really think he will leave us liberty of action.'

Ambrosio then made some comment about the war not being popular in Italy; and this made Mussolini more [illegible]than ever. 'Oh, don't let's have [illegible] for God's [illegible]e shouted, [illegible] He w[illegible] will be [illegible] ever h[illegible] the co[illegible]opular [illegible] Wars [illegible] [illegible]aldi [illegible]en, his [illegible]n, after a [illegible]s pau[illegible] political and [illegible]orical dissertation which 'would [illegible]e been interesting in any other

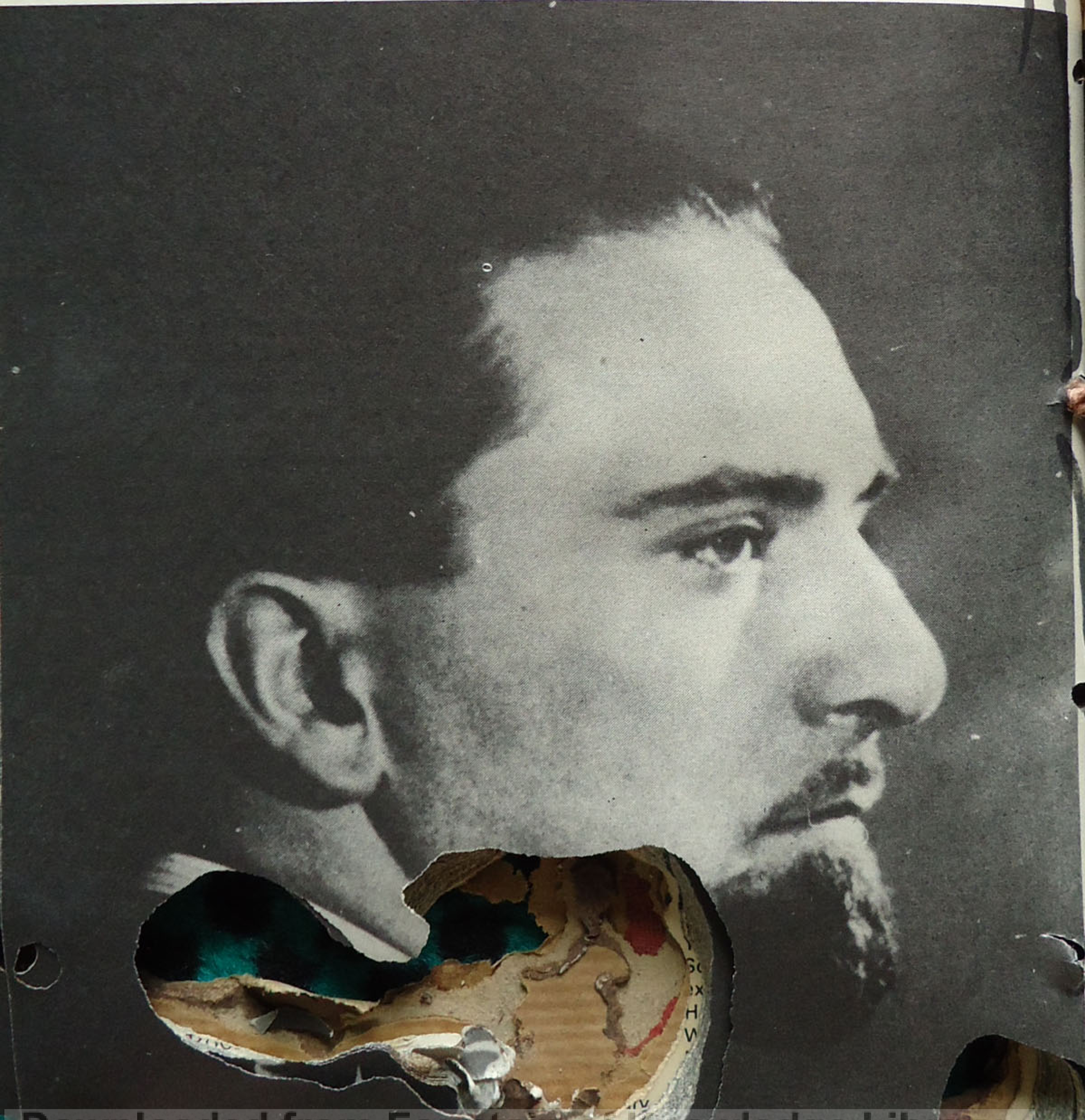
Left: **Death to Italian hopes – the Americans enter Sicily.** ***Below:*** **Mussolini in dark glasses at Feltre for yet another humiliating meeting with Hitler**

place and at any other time'.

A[illegible]io returned to Italy convi[illegible]t the Duce was even now ref[illegible] face up to the desperate pro[illegible]at faced him, that he wou[illegible]ccept the remedies which Hitler had proposed yet had conceived no alternative plans. He felt sure now that to save Italy the Duce must be removed.

For weeks in Rome, Fascists and non-Fascists alike had been discussing this very problem. Before the Feltre meeting the King, who had been in daily contact with various dissident Fascist groups, had decided, after weeks of hesitation and daily changes of mind, to order the arrest of Mussolini one day when he called for audience at the Villa [illegible]avoia or the Quirinale. Independen[illegible] the Fascists, he had appro[illegible] Marshal Badoglio to see if he w[illegible]epared to accept Mussolini's office. Badoglio had agreed on condition that the new administration was not a Fascist one;

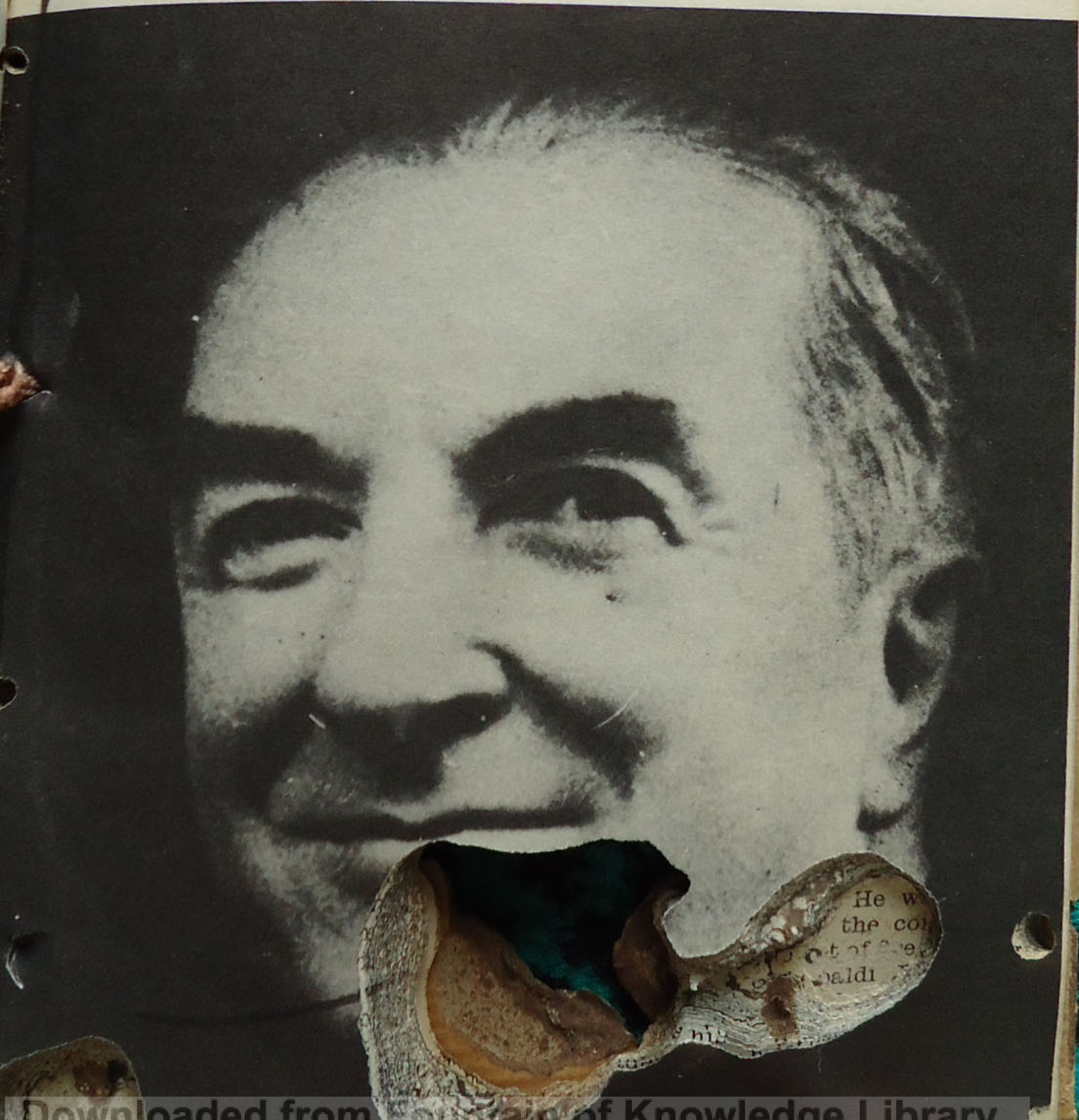
Count Dino Grandi – one of the first of Mussolini's supporters to press for the Duce's resignation



and the King's staff had therefore set about organizing the details of the arrest and attempting to forestall any opposition from General Galbiati who owed his command of the Fascist Militia to the egregious Petaccis.

At the same time the Fascists themselves had been plotting their leader's overthrow which it was planned should be arranged, with as little drama as possible, at a meeting of the Fascist Grand Council, the supreme constitutional authority of the state. This Council had been created by the Duce but had not met once since the war had begun, and he was reluctant that it should hold a meeting now. Under pressure he agreed, however, and the date was fixed for Saturday, 24th July.

Count Dino Grandi [illegible] two months before had declared to Mussolini, 'My life, my faith, my soul are yours' – had taken the initiative in proposing to present to the Council a resolution which initially seemed



Luigi Federzoni. He sided with Grandi in wanting to 'save the nation from Mussolini'

unexceptional but which went on to suggest that the time had come for the [illegible] resign his power. After a long rhetorical preamble, this resolution declared that 'the immediate restoration is necessary of all State functions, allotting to the King, the Grand Council, the Government, Parliament and the Corporations, the tasks and responsibilities laid down by our statutory and constitutional laws'. The resolution went on to propose that the Head of the Government should request His Majesty the King 'towards whom the heart of the whole nation [turned] with faith and confidence', to assume, together with the effective command of the Armed Forces, 'th[illegible] supreme initiative of decision' which the institutions of the country attributed to him and which in all the nation's history, had 'always been the glorious heritage of the august dynasty of Savoy'.

Grandi first showed [illegible]ft of this resolution to Luigi Fe[illegible]ni, a respected Fascist from the early days of the Party, who was now President of

Carlo Scorza. He also gave his sanction to Grandi's resolution

the Italian Academy. If Federzoni had condemned it, Grandi afterwards said, it might never have been presented; but, to Grandi's relief, after reading the document silently and with great care, Federzoni announced, 'We must try anything and everything, even the impossible, to save the nation from [illegible]tal ruin. Even if we fail in our a[illegible] our sacrifice will be the spar[illegible]ill fire a rebellion and arouse th[illegible]ple from their apathy.'

Anxious that there should be no grounds upon which he could subsequently be accused of conspiracy or treason, Grandi now openly canvassed support for his resolution. He took it to Bottai, to Giuseppi Bastianini and to Umberto Albini, three other senior and influential members of the Fascist Grand Council. They were not so unequivocal as Federzoni, but their reaction was sufficiently encouraging for him to spread his net wider. He went to see De Bono and De Vecchi, the two surviving members of the Quadrumviri who had led the March on Rome in 1922; both of them gave guarded promises of support, though it was obvious that neither of them would make his position clear unless the debate appeared to be running against the Duce. Other members of the Council whom Grandi subsequently approached were equally uncommittal but none was obstructive.

Even Carlo Scoza, the recently appointed Secretary of the Party, appeared to accept the document without surprise or objection, though, after Grandi had left Party Headquarters, he decided it would be best to cover himself by taking a copy to show the Duce. 'I read the docu[illegible]' Mussolini later recorded, 'an[illegible] it back to Scorza, declarin[illegible] was inadmissible and con[illegible] Scorza put it back in his br[illegible] did not insist further.'

Now that Mussolini kn[illegible] res[illegible]n, Grandi thought [illegible]n interview with [illegible] arranged that he [illegible]zzo Venezia at fiv[illegible] on the afternoon of 22nd Jul[illegible]In the Duce's engagement list t[illegible]andi interview was allotted a q[illegible] an hour. The subsequent ca[illegible]een assigned an hour and a h[illegible] was Field Marshal Kesselring.

Mussolini was standing up behind his enormous desk in the Sala del Mappamondo when Grandi walked in. He did not ask him to sit down. He listened to him patiently, however, and when Grandi had finished reading the resolution and had made a few remarks in support of it, Mussolini said, 'You would be right and the solution of putting everything into the hands of the King would be acceptable, if the war were lost. But in fact it is about to be won, because within a few days the Germans will launch a weapon which will transform the situation . . . For the rest we will talk calmly of all this at the session of the Grand Council next Saturday.'

Mussolini appeared to be not in the least concerned. It was as though he had entirely overlooked the essential intent of Grandi's proposal. Certainly he dismissed it as a small matter of no importance. When Kesselring entered his office, he remarked to him conversationally, 'Do you know Grandi who has just left? We have had a heart-to-heart talk and are in agreement. He is loyally devoted to me.'

Mussolini's dismissive unconcern disturbed Grandi far more than an outburst of rage would have done. On taking his leave he had noticed Kesselring waiting in the assembly hall and had thought to himself, 'This is not a good sign.' Perhaps the Duce had already taken steps to secure his position and to arrest his opponents. [illegible]as sufficiently alarmed to [illegible]nder-Sec[illegible]State for [illegible] He w[illegible]lice to [illegible]ior to a[illegible]ouncil [illegible]eeting [illegible]he put a [illegible]two hand [illegible]des in his brief case. He had been [illegible]onfession, and left behind a last [illegible]ter to his wife and children.

Rescue

Il Duce falls from power

As Grandi approached the Palazzo Venezia it seemed to him that his precautions were fully justified; there were numerous Fascist Militiamen in the courtyard, while others were patroling the corridors, stairs and apartments of the Palazzo itself. 'You did a fine thing by having that talk with [illegible]im,' Bottai murmured to him [illegible]ly. 'This is the end for us.' [illegible] entered the Chamber and sat [illegible] with the other members of the Council to await in trepidation the arrival of the Duce. They were all wearing, on his orders, the black bush-shirt known as the *Sahariana*.

When Mussolini strode into the room, he marched to his chair with his usual self-confidence, not looking at any of them. As though to distinguish himself from the others, to accentuate his aloofness as a man apart, he was wearing the greyish-green uniform of the Supreme Commander of the Fascist Militia. A briefcase, bulging with documents, was under his arm. 'Salute the Duce!' Scorza called out. They all obediently jumped to their feet and gave the traditional response, 'We salute him!' He sat down glowering at a table on a dais raised above the level of the table at which the others sat.

'The war has entered an extremely critical stage,' he announced. 'One may say that the real war began with the loss of Pantelleria. The peripheral war on the African coast was intended to avert or frustrate such an eventuality. In a situation like this, all official or unofficial trends of opinion, openly or clandestinely hostile to the régime, make common cause [illegible]inst us . . . The people's heart i[illegible] any war. War is always a p[illegible] war of the party which des[illegible] always one man's war. I[illegible] is called Mussolini's War[illegible] would have been called Ca[illegible] At [illegible] moment I am ce[illegible] [illegible]iked, or rather, lo[illegible] [illegible]. I did not in the [illegible] [illegible]tion of the Comm[illegible] Forces in the Field . . . When I fell ill in 1942 I contemplated gi[illegible] my military command, but I [illegible] do so because I thought it w[illegible]ban-don ship in the middle [illegible]rm. I postponed doing so until [illegible] a sunny day which has not so far appeared. I think there is nothing further to be said on the subject of the command. . .'

The speech, which he had obviously taken not the least trouble to prepare, rambled on inconclusively, inconsequentially, disengenuously. He found fault everywhere and in everyone but himself; he had never interfered in the direction of military operations, he insisted, it might well have been better for Italy had he done so. He attacked those who blamed Italy's collapse on Germany's failure to supply the promised material, refuting by reference to various documents which he read out at length, the 'thesis of the defeatists, according to which the Germans had not given Italy the necessary help'. But he made no reference to the recent meeting at Feltre or to the likelihood of obtaining the supplies that were urgently needed now. He spoke vaguely of tightening the reins, of assuming 'the necessary responsibility', of 'replacing men', 'turning the screw', 'bringing in forces not yet engaged', of moving the Government to the Po Valley; but he did not explain how any of these measures were to be undertaken in the present crisis. In one aside so outlandish and irrelevant that Bottai wondered whether he was trying to make some obscure joke, he said that he had foreseen the English would attack at El Alamein on 20th October because he knew they wanted [illegible] the twentieth anniversary [illegible]scist re[illegible]during the [illegible] He w[illegible] [illegible]g week[illegible] the co[illegible]rs, th[illegible] [illegible] pro-[illegible] several [illegible]one spoke. [illegible]s th[illegible] that followed, [illegible] uneasy silence they were all [illegible] Alfieri thought, conscious of an appalled disillusionment. They had never heard Mussolini speak [illegible] ill effect. Twenty years of [illegible] at an end.

[illegible] followed anti-climax. [illegible] rose to make a speech attacking politicians and defending the army commanders, and was subsequently supported by De Vecchi who made some slighting remarks about the Germans that provoked Roberto Farinacci to leap to their defence. De Vecchi thereupon accused Farinacci of shirking military service in the First World War and of posing as having been a hero in the Abyssinian War after being injured in a fishing accident. The debate threatened to become a petty personal wrangle when Bottai stood up to make the first proper speech of the evening and to criticise the Duce in unambiguous terms. It was after Bottai had sat down again that Grandi rose to propose his resolution and to make a powerful and condemnatory speech that lasted for over an hour. 'You have imposed a dictatorship on Italy' he said passionately, 'that is historically immoral. For [illegible] you have kept in your hands [illegible] Service Ministries. And what have you done? You have destroyed the spirit of our Armed Forces. For years you have suffocated our personalities in these funereal clothes. For years when selecting someone from among several candidates you have invariably selected the worst.'

The Duce listened to this astonishing, unprecedented tirade in silence,

The Fascist Grand Council

leaning in a cramped position over the table as though he were in pain, occasionally pressing his hands against his stomach or lifting them to shade his eyes from the glaring light of the chandeliers. His pale face was covered with sweat. Bottai thought that he looked utterly defeated and in despair, ‘li[illegible] the ghost of a man already [illegible] other side of life’.

He ap[illegible] to pay little attention to the sp[illegible]s that followed, neither to Ciano who condemned the Germans nor to Farinacci who again defended them, nor to any of the other members of the Council who rose halfheartedly to speak on his behalf or who bickered with each other, ignoring the importance of the motion before them.

At length, after midnight, in a voice which Bottai described as ‘[illegible] humble, almost pathetic’, Mus[illegible] wearily proposed that the me[illegible] should be adjourned; he was [illegible], he complained, to listen t[illegible] further reproaches when Italy was alone and face to face with the might of three Empires’.

But Grandi was relentless. Complaining that in the past, the Duce had kept them all out of bed until five o’clock in the morning to discuss some such relatively trifling matter as the 1927 Charter of Labour, he was determined that his resolution should be put to the vote. He agreed for an adjournment of ten minutes but no more.

Mussolini went into his office where he glanced without evident interest through a few telegrams and drank a glass of milk. Grandi and the others feared that he might take the opportunity to order their arrest. But he was too exhausted, too defeated for that; ‘the arrogance of the dictator,’ as Bottai said, ‘had given way to the submission of the accused.’

Alfieri came into the room to suggest that even now the Germans might be willing to grant further supplies, but Mussolini shook his head. Buffarini entered to urge the immediate arrest of all those who had spoken against him, but he dismissed him, too.

The brief respite seemed, however, to have restored a little of his old fire; and after Galbiati had made a strong speech in his favour, he rose to speak again himself, to make further threats, to warn them that he had enough evidence of their [illegible]tion to send them all to the [illegible] ‘You more th[illegible] anyone,’ he [illegible] This brief [illegible]nting [illegible] He w[illegible] promp[illegible]ce of t[illegible] make a [illegible]prehen[illegible]t by the [illegible] the time had [illegible] endeavoured to deal with the [illegible] of many interruptions, the meeting had degenerated into chaos.

Everyone was hurling insults, so Botta[illegible]; and Mussolini was now anno[illegible] that he had the key to the [illegible] situation, a secret weapon [illegible]ld end the war. If they dismissed him, they would lose the secret, lose the war, and lose their own heads into the bargain.

At last, at a quarter past two, the resolution was put to the vote. Of the twenty-eight members of the Council present, nineteen voted in its favour. When the result was announced, Mussolini gathered together his papers and stood up abruptly. 'Salute the Duce!' Scorza called out dutifully. But Mussolini cut short the mumbled response by snapping, 'I excuse you from that'. At the door he paused for a moment and announced accusingly, 'You have provoked the crisis of the régime.'

The next morning, however, he went to his office [illegible] usual and carried on with his work as though nothing unusual had occurred. He read the morning post with attention, and confirmed his appointments for the day, including an inter[illegible]ith the Japanese Ambassador.

'My father's behaviou[illegible]his time was completely incomprehensible,' Countess Ciano says. 'He knew that a *coup* was being prepared some fifteen days before it happened, but he did not take it at all seriously. He thought it would be sufficient just to change a few Ministers.'

His wife, astute and wary, had urged him to arrest all his known opponents before the Council meeting had begun, but he had made no reply. 'Well,' she had asked him when he returned to

Mussolini's wife, Rachele. She wanted Mussolini to arrest all his known opponents before the Council meeting had begun

Villa Torlonia, running out into the garden to meet him, 'You have had them all arrested, I suppose.'

'No,' he had replied, 'but I will.'

Yet he made no effort to do so. Refusing to admit even to himself and even at this late stage that he was [illegible]o longer in control of events, he ignored all warnings, disdaining the advice o[illegible]iati and Scorza to place all nin[illegible]embers of the Council who ha[illegible]ed against him under restraint. When Scorza telephoned him to say that some of the nineteen were now having second thoughts, he accepted the news as if he had expected it and had already decided how to deal with the traitors. 'Too late,' he answered with one of those characteristically enigmatic threats which once been heard with alarm but had long since ceased to carry any weight.

It was arranged that he would go to see the King that afternoon. He went home to a late lunch of soup and stewed fruit and to chang[illegible]to the civilian clothes which th[illegible] staff had specified for the a[illegible]This seemed ominous to hi[illegible]Don't go,' she warned him. 'H[illegible]t to be trusted.' But Mussolini had no sense of danger. It was possible that the King might wish to take over from him as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, but there would be nothing said more important than that. He had been to see his Majesty once or twice a week for more than twenty years, he assured Galbiati, 'I have consulted him on every matter of State and even private questions. He has always been solidly with me.'

He picked up his black felt hat and a briefcase containing a few papers and stepped into his car which drove off down the Via Salaria. It was a quiet Sunday, suffocatingly hot; the streets were almost deserted; the papers that morning had announced the fall of Palermo.

The car stopped outside the portico and the driver was surprised to see the King come down the steps in the uniform of a Marshal of Italy. He had never seen the King greet the Duce in that way before, nor had he ever seen so many *carabinieri* as there were in the grounds that day. But the Duce seemed quite unperturbed.

He shook his head silently when the King asked him how he was; and they walked into the cool of the villa together. Immediately Mussolini presented his report on the meeting of the Fascist Grand Council and dismissed the adverse vote as a matter of no consequence.

'My dear Duce,' the King replied, [illegible] according to Mussolini's [illegible]yellow a[illegible]nken, small- [illegible] ever a[illegible] with un-[illegible]gitati[illegible] painful

mumble', 'My dear Duce, it isn't any good [illegible] more. Matters are very serio[illegible]y is in ruins. The army is com[illegible]emoralised. The soldiers have[illegible]e to go on fighting . . . The G[illegible]uncil's vote is decisive... You can certainly be under no illusion as regards Italy's feelings for you now. At this moment you are the most hated man in the country. I am your only remaining friend. That is why I tell you that you need have no fears for your own safety. I will see you are protected.'

As the King went on to say that Marshal Badaglio was to succeed him, Mussolini sat down suddenly and heavily, pale and, so it seemed, faint. The King went on talking but Mussolini interrupted him to murmur, 'Then it's all over.'

And so it was. The meeting had lasted for a few minutes only. The Duce, accompanied by his secretary, came out of the villa, and walked down the steps towards [illegible]ar which had been moved acros[illegible]e other side of the drive. Half [illegible]wn the steps a captain in the *carabinieri* walked up to him, saluted and said, 'His Majesty has charged me with your protection.'

Mussolini objected, but the captain was insistent. 'No, Excellency, you

Milan. The Fascist regime ends in flames

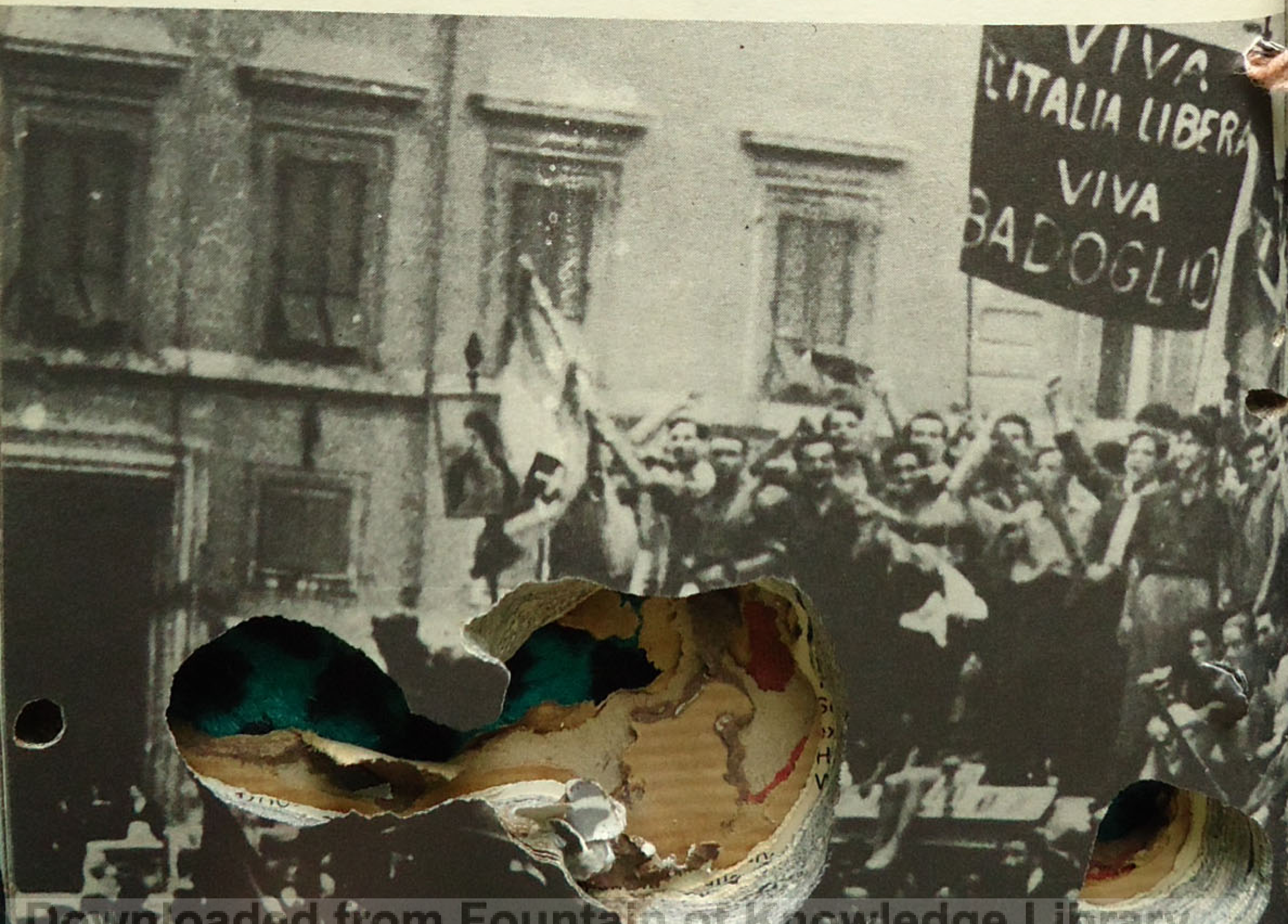
must come with me.' He took him by the elbow and led him to an ambulance the back doors of which were open. Mussolini stepped inside and as the doors were slammed shut he pulled his black hat down low over his eyes.

In the streets of Rome the people [illegible] already begun to gather to ask each other what was happening. There were squa[illegible]f soldiers armed with machine[illegible] the squares, but what they ha[illegible] called out for no one knew. There were rumours of an Allied parachute landing in the south; stories that the Duce had resigned, that he had flown to Germany, that he had been assassinated. It was known that the Grand Council had met, that the meeting had been prolonged; but its decisions ha[illegible] been made public. Even the [illegible] was silent. At last, at a quart[illegible]ven, the announcer came on [illegible] and declared in solemn tone[illegible] Majesty the King-Emperor has accepted the resignation from the office of Head of the Government and Chief Secretary of State, of His Excellency Cavaliere Benito Mussolini, and has nominated as Head of the Government and Chief Secretary of State Cavaliere Marshal of Italy Pietro Badoglio . . .'

The news was greeted with the wildest excitement which even the subsequent announcement that the war would continue failed to dampen. Everyone believed that this was merely a formula, a meaningless declaration made to give the new Government time to negotiate a peace without interference from the Germans. Crowds rushed through the streets shouting that the war was over, that Mussolini was dismissed and Fascism dead.

Fascism, indeed, was dead and had died without a struggle. Scorza went into hiding; Galbiati quietly handed over command of the Fascist Militia to the army; Farinacci fled to the German Embassy; Manlio Morgagni, director of the Stefani News Agency, shot himself; Alessandri Pavolini, editor of *Il Messagero*, whose offices were ransacked by the mob and whose portraits of the Duce were thrown into the street, disappeared. Host Venturi, the former Minister of Communications went out before dawn – 'to see whether the Party had made any move'. But by then 'everywhere was deserted and complete [illegible]ed'. Without Mussolini the [illegible]e had pr[illegible]elf incap[illegible]ction. A[illegible] He w[illegible]i him[illegible]hough [illegible] the co[illegible]y the [illegible] [illegible]plete[illegible] [illegible]ifferent [illegible]

[illegible]apse[illegible] [illegible]ini had been [illegible]iven at high [illegible] to the barracks of the *carabinieri* [illegible]via Quintino Sella. He had passed


VIVA
L'ITALIA LIBERA
VIVA
BADOGLIO

the journey in silence; but when the ambulance had stopped he had climbed down into the courtyard and had looked about him with his jaw thrust out as though he had been on a tour of inspection. It had not yet occurred to him that he had been arrested. He [illegible] still thought, as he later confessed, 'that all this was being done, as the Ki[illegible] said, in order to protect my [illegible]

He had [illegible] taken to the officers' mess and had been left there alone for an hour or so before being driven away again to another police barracks in Via Legnano where he had arrived looking so ill that the commandant had summoned a doctor who had found him 'very pale, almost death-like', with 'a very slow pulse'. He had been offered a meal, but had refused it, merely asking for a barber to shave him; and at eleven o'cloc[illegible] had put out the light and ha[illegible] to sleep.

Two hours later an a[illegible]eral arrived with a message fo[illegible]n from Marshal Badoglio. The message assured His Excellency Cavaliere Benito Mussolini that he was being held only for his own safety and because of reliable information from several quarters of serious plots against his life; if he would indicate where he would like to be taken he would be safely escorted there with all due consideration.

After some hesitation he dictated his reply. It was a submissive, almost servile letter in which, after asking to be taken to Rocca delle Caminate, he assured Badoglio, 'if only in remembrance of the work' they had done together in the past, that he would 'raise no difficulties of any sort', would 'co-operate in every possible way'. 'I express my earnest hope,' he concluded, 'that success will crown the grave task which Marshal Badoglio is assuming by order and in the name of his Majesty the King, whose loyal servant I have been for twenty-one years and shall continue to be.'

He asked the General to read the dictation over to him, then added the words 'Long Live Italy!' in blue pencil and signed the paper.

By the time Badoglio received this reply, it had been decided that it would not be advisable to allow Mussolini to return to the Romagna. The Prefect of Forlì urged that he should be taken somewhere else, for he could not guarantee that he would not be lynched, so strong were feelings [illegible]ing against him. Instruc[illegible]herefore [illegible] for him to [illegible] secretly [illegible]e small [illegible] Ponza [illegible] Naval [illegible] Mau-[illegible]ni [illegible]t of the [illegible]eri barracks [illegible] the evening [illegible]h July. He had been told nothing [illegible] the change of plan, and was expect-

Left: **Rome celebrates the fall of Mussolini.** ***Below:*** **Marshal Pietro Badoglio is welcomed as Mussolini's successor in Rome**

N 1922, quando il Duce salvò la Monarchia, il Re era raggiante!

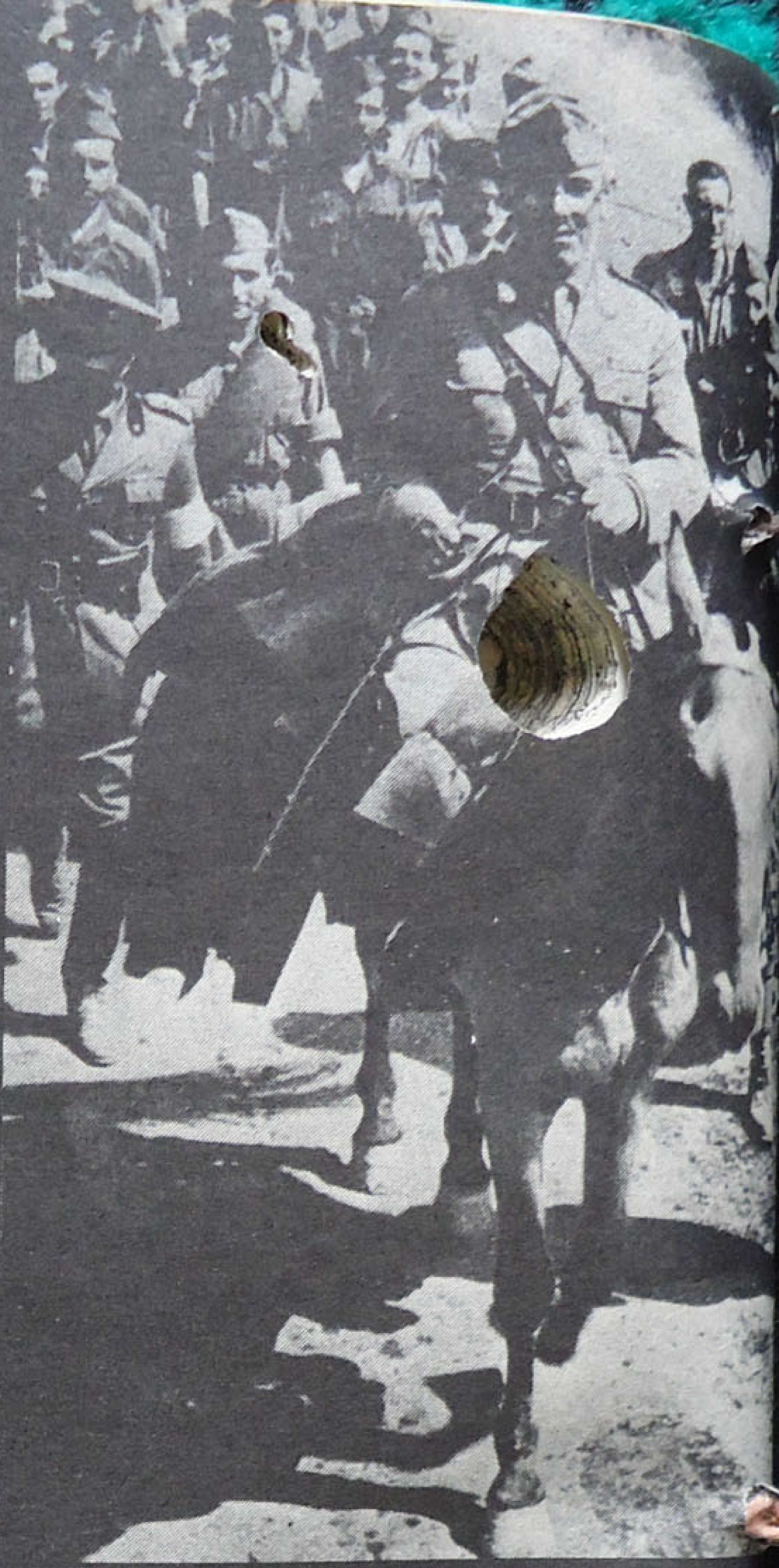
Il 25 lugl 43 . . .

ing to be taken north along Via Flaminia; but through a slit in the blinds of the car he saw that he was being driven south towards Via Appia and Albano. 'Where are we going?' he asked. 'South,' replied the police officer who was accompanying him. '[illegible] to Rocca delle Caminate?' 'Another order came.'

When th[illegible]r stopped at Gaeta, Mussolini[illegible] melancholy pride in the thoug[illegible]t Pope Pius IX had taken refuge there in 1848 and that Mazzini had been interned there in 1870. He even began to hope that he might be placed 'in the same cell as the great hero of our *Risor[illegible]nto*'; but he was soon disillusione[illegible]was taken to the island of Ponz[illegible]ere shared his exile with th[illegible]ist ex-Deputy Tito Zaniboni, [illegible] had been arrested for an attempt on his life in 1925, and with Pietro Nenni, who had once been imprisoned with him at Forlì. The isolated, drab-looking house which had been prepared for him had once been the prison of Ras Imeru, the Abyssinian patriot.

He entered it in the utmost depression. The bedroom into which he was shown had just been white-washed. There was no furniture in the room other than a bare iron bedstead, a dirty wooden table from a wine shop and a chair with the stuffing bursting out of its seat. There was a cheap wash-basin in the corner. He felt overcome by despair. 'I've had enough

Left: **A German leaflet dropped on Allied-occupied Italian territory after Mussolini's resignation. It says 'In 1922, when the Duce saved the Monarchy, the king was thankful'.**
Below: **German troops defend Monte Cassino**



Right : Italian troops surrender to Allied forces. *Above :* German officers interrogate Italian troops after Badoglio's government signed the armistice. *Below :* September 1943. Italian troops disarmed by the Germans in an internment camp

GERMANY
CZECHOSLOVAKIA
AUSTRIA
HUNGARY
SWITZERLAND
FRANCE
YUGOSLAVIA
Trieste
ENTERED ON 2 MAY 1945
Venice
Milan
TAKEN 26 APRIL 1945
Verona
Turin
Po
Genoa
Bologna
Leghorn
Arno
GOTHIC LINE
ADRIATIC SEA
Tiber
LIBERATED SEPTEMBER 1943
CORSICA
ROME
ENTERED ON 4 JUNE 1944
Sangro
GUSTAV LINE
Anzio
BEACHHEAD 22 JANUARY-22 MAY 1944
Naples
Salerno
Bari
Taranto
MONTE CASSINO FINALLY TAKEN 18 MAY 1944
SARDINIA
OCCUPIED AUTUMN 1943
TYRRHENIAN SEA
Palermo
Messina
SICILY
Catania
Syracuse
0 Miles 100
0 Kilometres 160

ampaign 1943-1945

of this,' he said suddenly, clenching his [illegible]nd turning towards the windo[illegible] he sat down in the chair wit[illegible]ad in his hands.

A [illegible]ant-major of the Ponza *carabin[illegible]*, who had watched the scene in embarrassment, came into the room and gave the Fascist salute. He remained standing there nervously, tried to say something but the words caught in his throat. 'We didn't know you were coming to Ponza Excellency. I was told barely half an hour ago.' 'Don't worry.' 'I so often wanted to meet you in the past to tell you things.' 'And now it's too late.'

Mussolini remained on the island for ten days, talking to the sergeant-major, the priest, the doctor and to anyone else who was allowed to visit him, justifying his past and condemning the 'miserable conspiracy' which had overthrown him. For hours he was left alone and he occupied himself in translating Carducci's *Odi barbare* into German, in reading Giuseppe Ricciotti's *Life of Christ*, and in finding 'surprising' analogies between Christ's fate and his own. On his birthday, 29th July, he was allowed to receive a letter from Göring who assured him of his 'brotherly friendship' and 'complete solidarity'; and two days later he wrote to his sister to tell her that he did 'not want funerals or funeral honours of any kind'. 'I believe,' he continued, 'that once the anger of my Romagna people has been placated, I shall be allowed to go to the Rocca, and there peacefully await the end of my life, which I hope will come soon.'

On 6th August, it being thought that the Germans might make an a[illegible]mpt to rescue Mussolini from [illegible] Badoglio[illegible]ment de[illegible] Admir[illegible] move safer a[illegible]ed imp[illegible] on the [illegible] base ne[illegible] depression [illegible] La M[illegible] was a bleak and lonely plac[illegible] which most of the civilian popul[illegible] had been evacuated after a heavy [illegible] raid. He found the atmosphere 'menacing and hostile', and was particularly exasperated that the commander of the naval base was a man whom he had court martialled after losing three ships without inflicting any loss on the British cruisers that had attacked him. This man, he discov[illegible]ed to his increased annoyance, had an English wife. Mor[illegible] the villa in which Mussolini [illegible]dged had belonged to an Englis[illegible]. Now, why should an Englishman want to settle in so gloomy a place as La Maddalena, he wondered, and answered himself, 'The Secret Service? Possibly.'

The three weeks that he spent on La Maddalena were even more miserable than the time he had spent on Ponza. It was insufferably hot and windless. 'Everything seemed nailed down under the sun.' He hardly ever left the Englishman's villa, spending much of his time filling a diary with notes of a 'philosophical, political and literary character', and reading the works of Nietzsche, a twenty-four volume edition of which was sent to him by Hitler with a covering no[illegible] from Marshal Kesselring: 'The Führer will consider himself happy if this great work of German literature gives you a little pleasure, Duce, and if you will consider it as an expression of the Führer's special attachment to you.'

The Führer had so far failed in his efforts to discover where Mussolini was. He had instructed Mackensen to go to see the King and ask for permission to visit him; but Badoglio had regretted that he was 'unable, in the personal interests of His Excellency Mussolini, to consent to the proposed visi[illegible] And for fear lest he be discover[illegible]La Maddelena, he was once [illegible]oved, this time back to the [illegible], to a ski-ing hotel high up [illegible]ruzzi, the Albergo-Rifugio, [illegible]ran Sasso. 'Ah!' Mussolini [illegible]ed with a childlike satis-[illegible]hen at last he re[illegible]ed it. [illegible] highest prison in [illegible]' [illegible]med far more inter[illegible] [illegible]agedy than in the [illegible] country. Comparing his fate to those of Napoleon, Caesar and Christ, he asked what seemed to him the one important question, 'What judgment will history pass upon me?'

'He showed neither sorrow nor humiliation,' the manageress of the hotel thought, 'only sometimes when he saw that h[illegible] was being watched he composed [illegible]atures in a studiedly thoughtfu[illegible]ssion . . . He did not spend his [illegible] in either reading or writing . . . He was often to be seen at the window, looking at the majestic Gran Sasso with field-glasses or sitting on the low wall by the courtyard, gazing abstractedly into the distance like the traditional oleograph of Napoleon on St Helena.'

He did not even take particular interest in the news of what he now called the 'sham war' on the radio. He heard of savage air raids and great losses of life; he learned of the conquest of Sicily, of German troops pouring into Italy, then of the capitulation and the armistice, of the King's and Badoglio's Government flying from Rome to Brindisi. But h[illegible]ned as though these events had n[illegible]ing for him since he was not [illegible]lly involved in them, until [illegible]d a Berlin transmission repeating a news item that had been broadcast on Algiers Radio from which it appeared that it had been 'officially announced that one of the conditions of the armistice is that Mussolini shall be handed over to the Allies'.

According to one of his guards, in the early hours of the morning after hearing this broadcast, Mussolini sent him a message declaring that he would 'never submit to such a humiliation' and asking him to let him have his revolver. On receipt of the message, the guard rushed into Mussolini's room where he found him sitting on the bed, 'awkwardly waving a Gillette razor-blade, as if he were trying to slit the veins of his wrist.'

The Gran Sasso hotel; for Mussolini, 'The highest prison in the world'

Mussolini, followed by his rescuer, Otto Skorzeny

The guard took the [illegible]rom Mussolini and removed [illegible] the room together with everything else which might have been used as a suicide weapon. Then, assuring Mussolini that he would never hand an Italian over to the British, he burst into tears. He did not tell Mussolini that he had a worse fear on his mind than that he would be forced to hand the Duce over to the British: it was that he would be forced to obey the most important of the instructions that he had been given. 'The Germans,' he had been told, 'must not take Mussolini alive.'

This was exactly what the Germans were planning to do. The seemingly impossible assignment had been given to Otto Skorzeny, a young captain in the Friedenthal Special Formation of the Waffen SS. At the time these orders had been given to him, Skorzeny had no idea even where Mussolini was, let alone how Hitler's instructions to rescue his friend and 'loyal comrade-in-arms' could be carried out. By the time Skorzeny had traced him to Ponza, the prisoner had been moved to La Maddalena; and by the time an operation to rescue Mussolini from there had been planned, he had been moved again to the Gran Sasso. To rescue him from the Gran Sasso would prove much more difficult than abducting him from an island, particularly as the only practicable way of getting him off the mountain appeared to be to crash-land a glider-borne force of trained men on the steep sl[illegible]hind the hotel and to fly [illegible] to Germany in a Heinkel [illegible]a airfiel[illegible]ich would [illegible]ly have t[illegible] He w[illegible]ured by [illegible] the co[illegible] [illegible]pers.

[illegible] on his [illegible]aldi [illegible]ptember, [illegible]sibiliti[illegible]ess seemed [illegible]e; and they became remoter [illegible] when his wireless operator failed to make contact with the Luftwaffe to call up the Heinkel from Rome, and the alternative plane, a lighter aircraft [illegible] could land and take off in the [illegible], had become so badly damaged [illegible] landing that it was unserviceable. Mussolini would then have to be flown off in a Fieseler-Storch spotter plane which, in the event of all other methods failing, it had been arranged should be landed on top of the plateau. First of all, however, Mussolini had to be taken alive from the protective care of his Italian guards.

To help him in achieving this, Skorzeny had enlisted the help of an Italian General, Soleti, who, immediately upon landing, rushed across the open ground towards the astonished *carabinieri* shouting 'Don't shoot! Don't shoot!' As the German commandos also ran towards the hotel, their machine-pistols at the ready, the Italians rushed for shelter, without thought of shooting, leaving the way free for Skorzeny to kick over the chair of a wireless operator in the first room he entered and to smash the set. He was soon standing face to face with Mussolini whom he announced dramatically, standing stiffly to attention. 'Duce! The Führer has sent me! You are free!'

The Duce held out his arms and hugged Skorzeny to his breast, before declaring with complementary theatricality, 'I knew that my friend Adolf Hitler would not desert me.'

He walked down the stairs and emerged with his rescuers into the open air, looking pale and old and

The Fieseler-Storch rescue plane prepares to take off

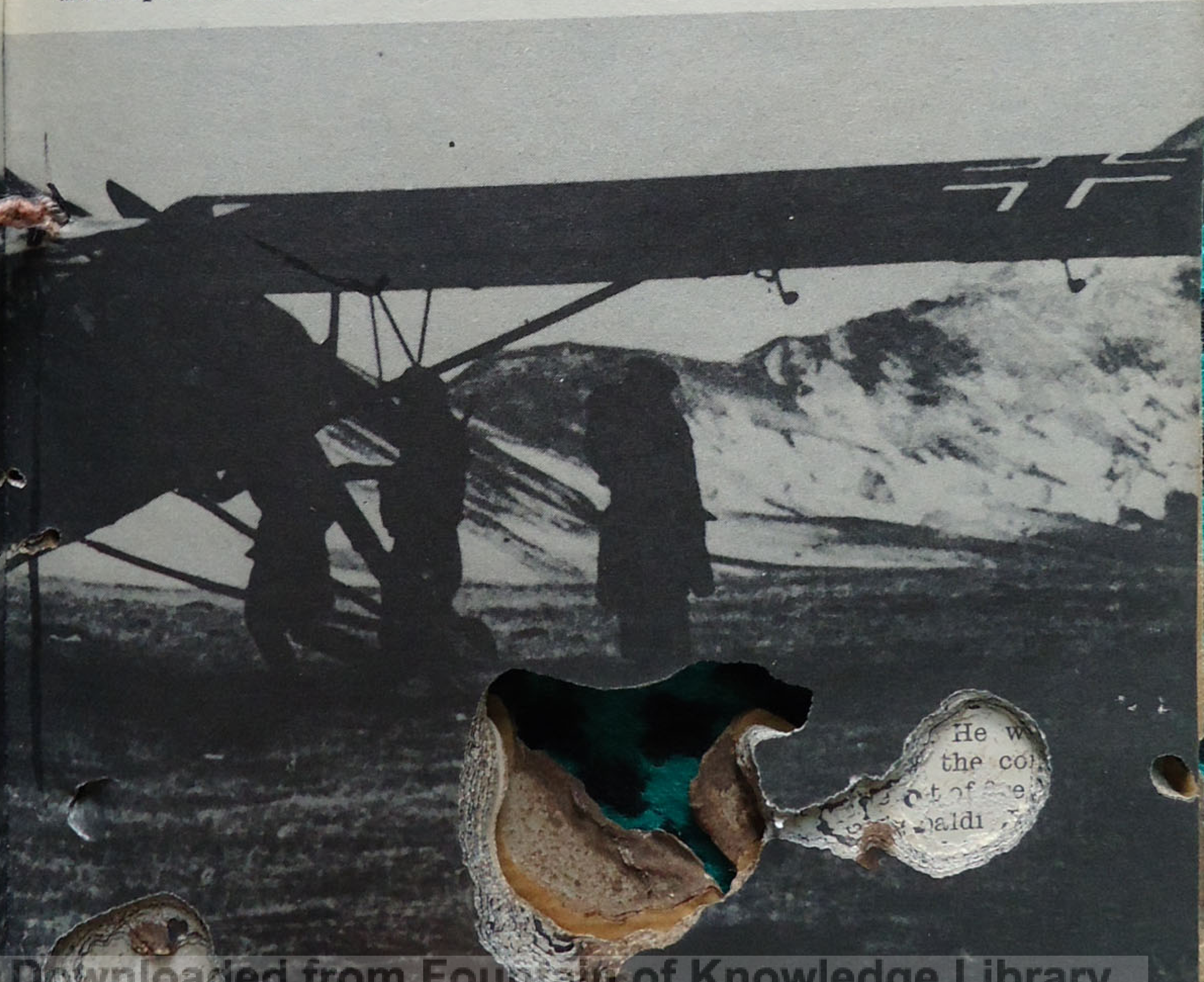
ill in his shabby suit, his black, wide-brimmed hat, and a winter overcoat, much too big for him. To the pilot's dismay, the heavily-built Skorzeny insisted on getting into the Fieseler-Storch aircraft with Mussolini and on flying with him to the Practica di Mare airfield. The pilot doubted he would be able to get the plane off the ground with one passenger, let alone with two. Mussolini shared his apprehension though he was too proud to mention it.

The German soldiers had lined the route from the hotel and, standing side by side with the *carabinieri*, had saluted him in the Fascist way ,shouting 'Duce! Duce! Duce!' He could not turn back now. He hesitated slightly before climbing aboard, Skorzeny noticed; but he said nothing. Nor did he speak as the plane roared across the plateau, its wheels remaining stubbornly on the ground.

It rose momentarily, fell again to hit a rock, then dived down over the edge into the valley. It [illegible] helplessly through the thin air and, as the wind roared in Mussolini's ears, it was, as he later confessed to a Swiss journalist, 'a moment of real terror for me'. At last the machine came out of its dive and raced off towards Avezzano, less than a hundred feet above the ground.

On the Practica de Mare airfield, Mussolini was transferred to a Heinkel which transported him to Vienna where Hitler telephoned to congratulate him upon his escape. Mussolini, however, did not want to talk. 'I am tired,' he said, 'very tired. And I want to rest.'

Goebbels thought that that was all



ssolini, looking more apprehensive than pleased, with Skorzeny

After the rescue

Mussolini was good for now [illegible]ew that Hitler wanted to rest[illegible] to power for fear lest the fall [illegible]scism might be taken as a prelude to the collapse of National Socialism; but Goebbels preferred the idea of an Italy without Mussolini, an Italy in which the Germans would be able to do exactly as they liked. And it was this knowledge that Italy would otherwise be occupied and governed by Germans that largely persuaded Mussolini to agree to Hitler's suggestion that he should establish a new Fascist Government in northern Italy, entirely independent of the House of Savoy.

Mussolini's lukewarm acceptance of the German plan, his obvious desire to retire into private life, and to leave his betrayers unpunished, disillusioned both the Führer and Goebbels. 'The Duce has not drawn the conclusions from Italy's catastrophe which the Führer expected,' Goebbels wrote in his diary. 'He was naturally overjoyed to see the Führer and to be at liberty again. But the Führer expected the first thing the Duce would do would be to wreak full vengeance on his betrayers. He gave no such indication, however, which showed his real limitations. He is not a revolutionary like the Führer or Stalin. He is so bound to his own Italian people that he lacks the broad qualities of a world-wide revolutionary and insurrectionist . . . In the last analysis he is nothing but an Italian, and he can't escape that heritage.' He was now, Goebbels was convinced, 'incapable of staging a [illegible]back . . . Old Hindenburg gre[illegible]dly right when he said [illegible]ussolini w[illegible]never be [illegible] He w[illegible]talians [illegible]ake anyth[illegible] the co[illegible]g him- [illegible]lians. Co[illegible] never [illegible]e [illegible] as the Muss[illegible] [illegible]d done, Goe[illegible] leant back [illegible]chair, intoning ironically the [illegible]ist chant, 'Duce! Duce! Duce!'

Execution

A reluctant Mussolini makes an official come-back

Regarding himself as already a figure of history, Mussolini would have liked to give up the leadership of the revived Fascist Party to another man; but no other Italian appealed to Hitler. When the names of the Germanophile Roberto Farinacci, the anti-semitic Giovanni Preziosi and the political fanatic, Alessandro Pavolini, were suggeste[illegible] Führer would not contemplat[illegible]. They had all fled to Germany after Mussolini's arrest instead of organising a counter-revolt and forcing the King to hand over command of the armed forces to the Germans. 'There's nothing to be done with these dagos!' Hitler exclaimed in irritation, and he would have nothing to do with any of them. Mussolini was irreplaceable, despite his physical and moral deterioration. It was he who must lead the new Italian Republic whose headquarters were to be established not in Rome, which it was feared might one day soon have to be abandoned to the Allies, but at Salò on Lake Garda.

This *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* was accordingly established on 17th September 1943 by six Orders of the Day, the first of which provided for the Duce's resumption of 'the supreme direction of Fascism in Italy'. Other Orders revived the Fascist Party as the *Partito Fascista Repubblicano*, recreated the Fascist Militia, confirmed the German alliance, and announced the Party's determination to punish the traitors of 25th July.

The members of the new Government, though they did not include either of the extremists, Roberto Farinacci and Giovanni Preziosi, all accepted the fact that these [illegible]ers must be brought to justice, a [illegible] action upon which Mussolin[illegible] appeared to be resolved. [illegible] their names were mentione[illegible] became set and determine[illegible] secretaries could not but wo[illegible] he [illegible] really thinking. [illegible] believed that he [illegible] to hide behind tha[illegible] [illegible]ssion, at once merci[illegible] passionless, a shame for having given in so readily to German de[illegible]s or a pity for his daughter and h[illegible]dren – for Ciano would obviou[illegible]ve to suffer with the rest of the [illegible]y men. Others supposed that he was endeavouring to recover his early reputation for stern justice and impartiality. To Count Serafino Mazzolini, his Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs (he had taken upon himself ultimate responsibility for the direction of what little independent foreign policy the Republic would be entitled to have) he said that the trials were necessary for pure reasons of state. With the journalist, Ivanoe Fossani, he was more explicit: 'It was necessary to restore faith in the German alliance.'

Certainly, he firmly refused all pleas from his family and the friends of the accused to save the traitors from the Germans. When his daughter came to see him and became almost hysterical, he told her not to 'get so upset': Ribbentrop had provided him with more than sufficient evidence of her husband's perfidy, 'particularly in regard to the English'. There could be no question of pardoning him. 'Before the supreme necessity of Rome,' he told Edda, who, having made a passionate plea to him as her father and her children's grandfather, burst into tears, 'Roman fathers never hesitated in sacrificing their sons. Here there is neither father nor grandfather. There is only Fascism's Duce.'

So the trial began at Verona in January 1944, and Mussolini made no attempt to interfere with its direction[illegible]ucting the President of the [illegible] proceed 'without regard [illegible] it, whosoeve[illegible] might be'. [illegible]ion to Cian[illegible]ve of the [illegible] were in [illegible] Ma[illegible] Bono [illegible] and Par[illegible]he [illegible] including [illegible]ader, Grand[illegible]o had flown [illegible]pain, had managed to escape [illegible]oad or hide themselves in Italy. But all of them, with the single exception of Cianetti, who had withdrawn his a[illegible]se vote in the Council in a fit o[illegible]rse the next morning, were cond[illegible] to death. When the time of execu[illegible] came, it was felt that at least De Bono, the elderly Marshal who had lent respectability to the March on Rome, would be spared; but no word from Mussolini came. The five victims were tied in a row to school-chairs and shot in the back.

Mussolini accepted the news of their execution in silence, merely remarking afterwards that he was glad that they had died like good Italians and Fascists. But before he left for the office that m[illegible]ng, having

The trial begins in Verona of the 'traitors' of 25th July eaten nothing for breakfast, his wife noticed that he was 'weeping tears of despair'. 'We will lose the sympathy of the Italian people,' he confided in his trusted secretary, Giovanni Dolfin. 'They will never understand my torment.'

The next day, however, his mood had changed once more. 'Now that we've started rolling heads in the dust,' he said grimly to one of his Ministers, 'we'll carry on to the end.' And he gave to the Chief [illegible]ice a a list of untrustworthy F[illegible] who were to be immediately a[illegible]d; but no sooner had the orders been issued than they were retracted: he had changed his mind again.

Such sudden changes of mind and mood had now become so common

that his staff usually waited a day or so be[illegible] carrying out any order he gave[illegible] High excitement would be follow[illegible]y gloomy despondency; attitud[illegible]r relentless determination were succeeded by uncertainty and vacillation; sudden rages would erupt, then die down into quiet sadness and forgiveness. Farinacci assured Ribbentrop that he was 'obviously in the tertiary stage' of syphilis. But the German doctor, Professor Georg Zachariae, whom Hitler had insisted should accompany Mussolini back to Italy, had made a careful analysis of his blood and could find no trace of any venereal infection. Zachariae did, however, describe his patient as being far from well. He was suffering from nervous exhaustion, sleeplessness and loss of appetite. 'He eats very little,' Zachariae reported to Berlin. 'Cramps in his stomach prevent him from sleeping. He has very low blood-pressure, a dry skin, his abdomen has become excessively thin and his liver is swollen.'

He worked very long hours in h[illegible] office in Villa Feltrinelli at Gargnano, a few miles north of S[illegible]ut it was supposed that he did s[illegible]ly as an excuse to escape from h[illegible]aughters-in-law who irritated him, from his grandchildren who disturbed him with their noisy games and from his wife who quarrelled with him because Claretta Petacci had been found a flat in the nearby Villa Vittoriale. Certainly in his office he did little constructive work, spending hours reading, filing, cutting and annotating newspapers, in writing articles, in rambling conversations with Ministers and journalists and all others who

Verona, January 1944. The execution of Gottardi, Marinelli, Pareschi, Ciano and de Bono

visited him, and in what his colleagues conceived as utterly unimportant, indeed irrelevant, enterprises, such as the possibility of introducing collective farming, the establishment of a framework for a Welfare State, the introduction into Fascism of the lost socialist principles of his youth, the securing of papal recognition for the régime, th[illegible]establishment of hospitals for [illegible]verished victims of tuberculo[illegible]

All these sudden enthusiasms would soon collapse and he would become resigned, depressed and introspective once again, referring all business elsewhere. 'Mussolini tends to withdraw from all questions of Government,' a young German officer in Salò, Fürst Urach, wrote home. 'If a German General comes to him with some request he says, "Oh do talk to Graziani" [the Minister of Defence]. If Leyers or some economic expert comes, he says, "Oh, do see my Economics Minister, won't you?" ' When one visitor, more determined [illegible] the rest, insisted that the Pres[illegible] own decision was vital, Musso[illegible]eplied that if the decision really were a vital one he could not possibly make it. The Germans must decide: as for himself he was merely Mayor of Gargnano.'

Such outbursts against the Germans were commonplace. Whenever he looked out of the window, he complained, he saw a German helmet. General Wolff, Chief of the SS in Italy and Colonel Eugen Dollmann, another SS officer, were his 'jailors'. The complaints were not unjustified. Guards of the *Volksdeutsche* constantly patrolled the grounds, and the German Ambassador, Rudolf Rahn, like Wolff and Dollman, was a persistent visitor. 'He is fantastically guarded,' Fürst Urach said, 'I always sing or whistle as I go through the garden as there is an SS man with a pistol behind every tree. There are a few Italian Blackshirts there as well – just to keep up appearances.'

In these surroundings, Mussolini talked and talked of his past triumphs and achievements, of all that he had done for Italy, and of his contemporaries; of Roosevelt, whom he detested more violently than ever, of Churchill 'that obstinate old man' whom he admired, of Stalin whose power he envied, of the 'biological decadence' of the French leaders. He spoke, too, of the dead; of Frederick the Great and Napoleon, of Garibaldi and Bismark, of Washington and Mazzini. Above all he talked of himself. 'He thinks only of [illegible]' his young and eager [illegible]pular Culture, Fernando [illegible]said, 'and [illegible]ow he will [illegible]n it. He w[illegible] [illegible]t the Party [illegible] the co[illegible]ers during [illegible]ferenc[illegible]ing him [illegible]tly st[illegible]aldi [illegible]ed about [illegible], then, stopp[illegible]ith his arms [illegible] on his chest, asked intently, [illegible]at is Fascism? It can be answered [illegible] only one way. Fascism is Mussolin-

Fernando Mezzasoma, Minister of
Popul[illegible]ulture

ism. Let us not delude ourselves. As a doctrine Fascism contains nothing new. It is a product of the modern crisis.' He had not created Fascism; he had merely exploited the Italians' inborn Fascist tendencies. 'If this had not been so I would not have been allowed for twenty years. The Italians are a most fickle people. When I am gone, [illegible]m confident that the historian[illegible] the psychologists will ask how a [illegible]n had the power to lead such a people for so long. If I had done nothing else, this masterpiece would be enough to prevent me from being swallowed up in oblivion. Others will conquer with fire and sword, perhaps, but certainly not with consent as I did . . . When people say that we were the white guard of the *bourgeoisie* they lie shamelessly. I have promoted – and I say this with a clear conscience – the progress of the workers more than anyone. I have made dictatorship noble. I have not, in fact, been a dictator at all, because my power was no more than the will of the Italian people.'

On occasion, however, he was less certain that history would pronounce upon him so favourable a verdict. 'We've lost completely without the possibility of appeal,' he said to Nicola Bombacci, a former Communist whom he had known since 1902 when they were school masters together at Gualtieri. 'One day history will judge us and say that many buildings were built, that many bridges were thrown across many rivers; but it will be forced to conclude that, as far as the spirit is concerned, we were only common pawns in the recent crisis of human conscience, and t[illegible]we remained pawns to the end.'

'Hitler and I,' he commen[illegible] other day, 'have surrende[illegible] selves to our illusions like a [illegible] lunatics. We have only one [illegible] to create a myth.' His allia[illegible] Germany had, from the begi[illegible] [illegible]ised, been a disaster [illegible] Italy. He confessed to [illegible] 'Hitler's German[illegible] Fascist: immense gatherings, dazzling parades, an epic atmosphere of vitality and military glory. All [illegible] blinded me. I must admit it. I al[illegible]d the life which was mystical and heroic, the conquests, the glory. I thought that my future lay with the Axis. I wished to convert a nation of artists into a warrior people. I forgot that I was a statesman and I disregarded the fate of millions of men.'

Yet to Francesco Coppola he said that he was not really a statesman at all, but an artist like the people he had tried to convert. 'I am not a statesman,' he said. 'I am more like a poet, and a mad poet at that.'

'He was no longer the strong chief directing his Ministers,' Otto Skorzeny, who visited him in June 1944, recalled. 'He seemed more like a philosopher now and to have resigned from action completely.'

There was, he felt, but one thing left for him to do, and that was to extricate Italy from the war by negotiating peace. Distressed by the struggle between Italian and Italian behind the lines, by the growing fight between Fascist and anti-Fascist that threatened to assume the proportions of a civil war, he talked occasionally of transferring the Fascist Party into '*un organismo di tipo esclusivamente militari*, an exclusively military organism, of mobilizing all men between the ages of nineteen and sixty, who were not already in the armed forces of the Republic, into squads of armed Blackshirts in order to safeguard 'public order and the peaceful life of the citizens against the cut-throats and those who were collaborating wi[illegible]my'. But in his heart he [illegible]e time for such measures [illegible]d that he must try to [illegible]eace.

[illegible]rch 1945 he [illegible]to negotiate with Ca[illegible]er, Arch[illegible]f Milan, [illegible]ning the [illegible]hope that eve[illegible]ow he might [illegible]e once more as a leading figure [illegible]he fight against Bolshevism. But the Cardinal was given to understand through the Vatican that the Allies did 'not intend to enter into negotiations, [illegible]ting on unconditional surrende[illegible]

So M[illegible]ini returned to that dream-world of his at Gargnano, more forlorn, more lost to reality than ever.

'My star is set,' he told the wife of the German Press Attaché. 'I am finished. I work and exert myself, though I know it is all a farce . . . I am the captain of a ship in a storm. My ship has broken up and I am floating on a piece of wreckage in a tumultuous sea. It is impossible to act or to save the situation! No one hears my voice and I now withdraw into silence . . . Death has become a friend, who no longer frightens me. Death is a gift from God to those who have suffered too much . . . One day, though, the world will listen to me again.'

'He lives by dreams, in dreams and through dreams,' Mezzas[illegible]a said. 'He does not have the leas[illegible]act with reality. He lives and [illegible]ions in a world which he builds for himself, a completely fantastic world. He lives outside time, His reactions, his enthusiasms, his breakdowns, never have any relation to life.'

In the real world beyond the walls of Villa Feltrinelli, the war in Italy was reaching its climax. After the fall of Rome on 4th June 1944, Pisa had fallen on 27th July and Florence had been captured on 4th August. For a time rain and the Gothic line had prevented a further advance, but the Poles had broken the Comacchio line on 9th April; New Zealand troops had crossed the River Santerno on 11th April and the Americans had broken

Left: Cardinal Schuster, Archbishop of Milan. *Right:* June 1944. US Fifth Army enters Rome through the Argento Gap and on 19th April were advancing on Bologna.

On the same day, Mussolini prepared to leave Gargnano for Milan, accompanied by an escort of German troops and by Lieutenant Fritz Birzer of the SS whose orders were not to let the Duce out of his sight for an instant. For days the situation at Gargnano and Salò had been utterly confused. Mussolini had listened to the contradictory advice of the Germans and his various Ministers and advisers with a kind of apathetic indifference. Some had suggested a last stand at Trieste; others talked of making Milan an Italian Stalingrad; still others, including, most vociferously, Pavolini, advocated a dramatic fight to the death in the Alps, in the Valtellina north of Bergamo. Mussolini had appeared to take little notice of the heated debates, concerned not so much with the choice of a suitable plan for Fascist Italy's last stand as with his own apotheosis. When Graziani had attacked the idea of a fight in the Alps

New Zealand troops in the battle for Monte Cassino

and criticised Pavolini for not making more detailed plans, he had said quietly and wearily, as though the matter did not really concern him, ‘No one is obliged to go to the Valtellina. Each one of you must decide for yourself.’

At Mil[illegible]here Mussolini established his [illegible]dquarters in the Prefecture, the situation was even more confused than it had been at Gargnano. But the almost hysterical atmosphere, so strongly reminiscent of the birth and early days of Fascism, gave Mussolini new life and spirit. When the Ambassador, Rahn, came to see him on 21st April, he found him ‘imperturbable and serene’. He was confident of the Fascists’ resistance lasting a good month, long enough to form a stable Government which could ensure a satisfactory peace. A journalist who came to interview him found him talking of secret weapons again, a turn in the tide of the war, a new anti-monarchial front with the Socialists. He proudly handed the journalist a signed photograph of himself, dated boldly ‘Year XXIII of the Fascist Era’.

Even when news came of the advance along the Po, of the fall of Modena and Reggio to Allied troops, of Genoa to the partisans and of Fiume to Tito, he refused to listen to appeals that he should fly out of the country before it was too late. Buffarini-Guidi, the former Minister of the Interior in the disintegrating government, suggested an escape to Switzerland; Dr Zachariae advocated [illegible]in; Francesca Lavagnani, once [illegible] tress, proposed a flight t[illegible] America; Tamburini, his [illegible] Police, even thought of P[illegible] The Inspector of the Fascist[illegible] Lombardy advised a withd[illegible] Cadenabbia; General Misch[illegible] R[illegible]an Army insisted t[illegible] [illegible] to Sondrio; Claretta [illegible] [illegible]n to allow her to stage [illegible] accident after which it could be announced that the Duce had been killed. But he dismissed all the suggestions impatiently. Collecting together various documents upon which he set great value, he declared repeatedly that he would die fighting in the Valtellina. His career was over, but it was still necessary to create a myth. In a final speech made to various officers who had been brought to see him he spoke with a flash of his former power of the immortality of Fascism.

Before he left Milan, however, he decided, in order to ‘spare the Army any further sacrifice’, that he would make one last attempt to arrange a surrender. He asked Carlo Silvestri, a Socialist journalist, to make contact with the Committee of National Liberation and to tell them that he was prepared to hand over power to the partisans.

On 25th April, four days after the fall of Bologna, Mussolini left for the palace of Cardinal Schuster for a meeting with representatives of the Committee, asking Marshal Graziani to follow him there later. He appeared dejected and ‘extremely tired’, Cardinal Schuster said, ‘like a man bereft of will, listlessly accepting his fate’. He spoke flatly of his continuing the war, if necessary, with 3,000 Blackshirts in the mountains.

‘Duce, do not have any illusions,’ Schuster warned him. ‘I know the Blackshirts who are going to follow you are more like three hundred than. three thousand.’

Mussolini accepted the Cardinal’s estimate without demur. ‘Perhaps a few [illegible]t many though,’ he said. [illegible]sions.’

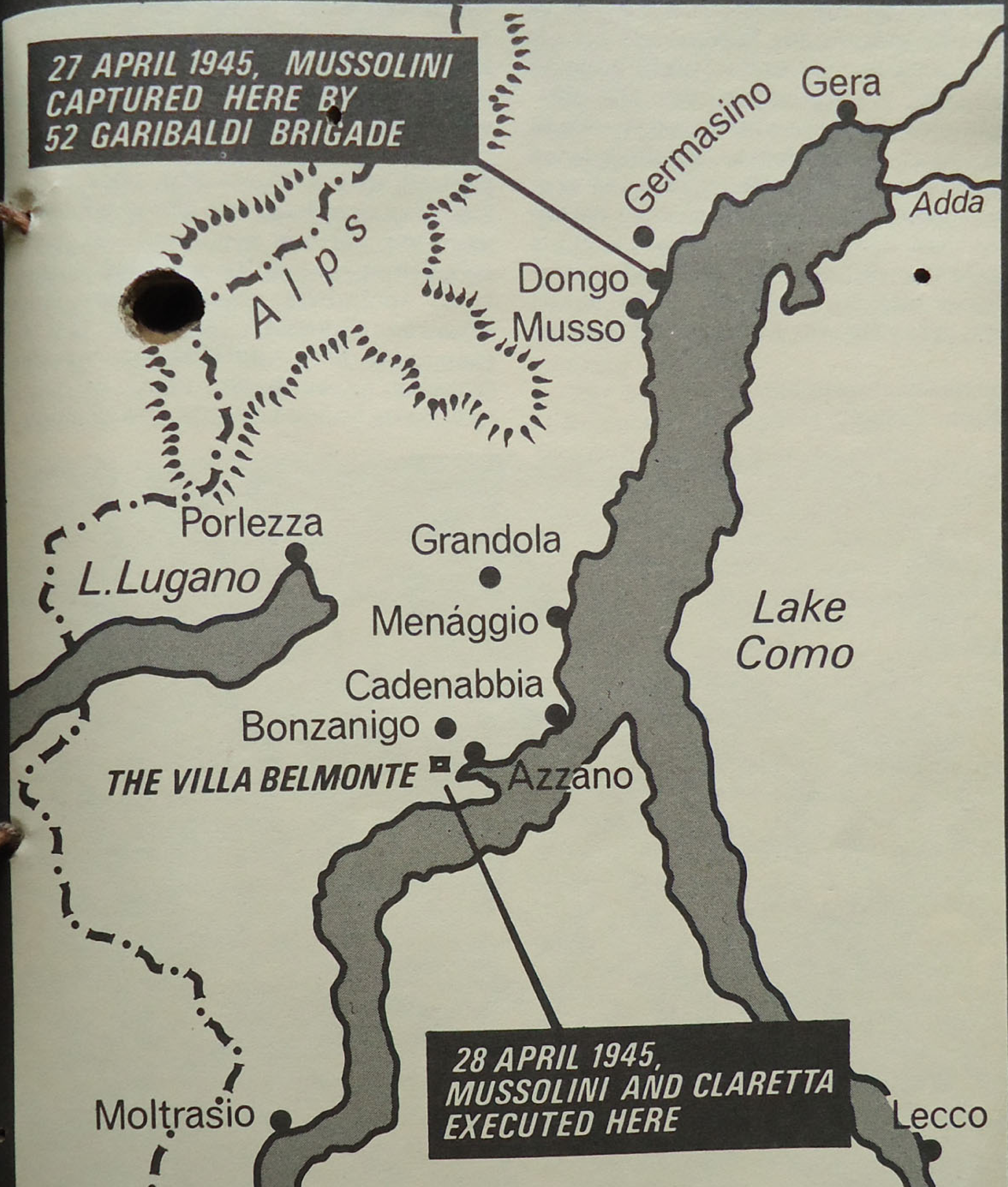
[illegible]k the representatives of [illegible]ional Liberat[illegible]mmittee [illegible] and discus[illegible]out the [illegible]s of the [illegible] of the [illegible]n forces be[illegible]ediately. [illegible]tisan leaders required the [illegible]tration of all armed Fascists [illegible] the Milan-Como-Lecco triangle where they were to lay down their arms; although subsequent proceedings might be taken against a few individuals, the rest would be guaranteed immunity as prisoners of war. While discussing the details of these proceedings against war criminals and other Fascists wanted by the partisans, it transpired that for two months past the Germans had been negotiating with the Allies for the surrender of all their forces in Italy. This was the first Mussolini had heard of the proposed German surrender, and he burst out in indignation, 'They have acted behind my back. They have treated us like slaves.' The other delegates endeavoured to calm him, but his anger was uncontrollable. He asked for an hour to consider the National Liberation Committee's proposals, and stormed back to the Prefecture, declaring with a kind of grim satisfaction, 'This time we shall be able to say that Germany has betrayed Italy.'

At the Prefecture he pointed to the map on the wall with a trembling finger and announced: 'We leave Milan immediately. Destination Como.' He did not say what his followers were to do in Como, nor what their ultimate destination was to be; but as Carlo Tiengo, a former Fascist Prefect of Turin warned him, his life was no longer safe in Milan. The secretary of the Socialist Party, Allesandro Pertini, had been to the Cardinal's Palace to look for him, declaring that two days would be enough to set up a People's Tribunal and to execute summary justice.

He was bombarded with contradictory advice from every side. Buffarini-Guidi continued to [illegible] to fly out of the country [illegible] torio, also pressed him [illegible] ing him [illegible] there were st[illegible] aircraft [illegible] Ghedi airfiel[illegible] Borsani, [illegible]d disciple [illegible] been blin[illegible] Albania, [illegible] begged him not to leave Milan[illegible]

Mussolini appeared not to li[illegible] any of them, brushing aside a sec[illegible]ary who ran up to him with urgent papers to sign. He fetched two leather bags filled with the documents which he had been so carefully sorting out during the past few days and handed them to Carradori, a trusted Blackshirt with some money. Then he appeared outside his office in the uniform of the Fascist Militia with [illegible] machine gun over his shoulder, and declared his last orde[illegible] the day, 'To the Valtellina!'

At eight o'clock t[illegible]convoy of lorries left the courtyard of the Prefecture, carrying various Blackshirts and Ministers of the Republican Government and followed by two trucks packed with SS men under the command of Lieutenant Birzer who doggedly refused to submit to Mussolini's orders to leave him. At Como, Mussolini halted the convoy, saying that he would wait there for the 3,000 loyal Fascists which Pavolini had promised him but which, as he had admitted to Cardinal Schuster, he did not really expect. His anger had cooled; the decisiveness had left him; he was now as dejected and resigned to his fate as he had been upon arrival at the archiepiscopal palace in Milan. His principal concern appeared to be for the documents some of which he had entrusted to the care of Carradori, others of which were being driven to Como in a truck from Milan. Presumably these documents (though no one then or subsequently discovered what they were) would be of value as evidence on his own behalf and against the Allies, the Germans and Italian anti-Fascists in any trial he might be called upon to face. When he heard that a lorry containing part of the m[illegible] gold and valuables of the [illegible]an Government and its Mini-[illegible]terwards known as the 'Dongo [illegible]e', had been intercepted by [illegible]s on its way north, he dis-[illegible]he news as of no importance. [illegible]h he was told that the truck [illegible]s documents had also been [illegible]d, he was distraught. [illegible]e waiting for Pavolini [illegible] letter to Rachele te[illegible]


27 APRIL 1945, MUSSOLINI CAPTURED HERE BY 52 GARIBALDI BRIGADE
Alps
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Grandola
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THE VILLA BELMONTE
Azzano
28 APRIL 1945, MUSSOLINI AND CLARETTA EXECUTED HERE
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that he had reached the last stage of his life, asking her forgiveness for all the harm he had unwittingly done to her, and urging her to take the children across the Swiss frontier. When she received the letter, Rachele tried to telephone him. She had tried several times already, but always before she had failed to get through. This time she did so; and she had 'never heard him so apathetic'. She asked him what he was going to do, and he replied wearily, 'I follow my destiny.' Most of his followers had deserted him, he told her. 'I'm alone, Rachele, now,' he said. 'And I realise quite well that it's all over.'

She said goodbye to him, but then decided to try to see him once more. She managed to get to Como where [illegible] gave her various documents from his remaining, carefully guarded collection, including some [illegible]ers from Winston Churchill. 'I[illegible]y try to stop you from getting across the frontier or to harm you,' he said, 'ask to be handed over to the English.'

Partisans view bodies of Musso-Fascists aides in Dongo

A few hours later, at about three o'clock in the morning, Mussolini decided that it was not worthwhile waiting there any longer for Pavolini's men, and he drove off to Menaggio. The convoy drove further up into the mountains to Grandola, ten miles from the Swiss frontier. There it halted to await the long-delayed arrival of Pavolini and what men he had been [illegible] muster.

Mussolini moved into the Miravalle Hotel, where he sifted through his documents once more while the radio broadcast occasional news about the collapse of resistance all along the front, the uprising of the people in northern Italy, and a decree which provided that 'members of the Fascist Government and the leaders of Fascism who are guilty of suppressing the constitutional guarantees, destroying popular liberties, creating the Fascist régime, compromising and betraying the fate of the country and conducting it to the present catastrophe are to be punished with the penalty of death . . . '

One by one Mussolini's remaining followers gradually slipped away. Graziani left to join an army unit at Mandello; Buffarini-Guidi and Angelo Tarchi, another former Minister in the Salo Government, tried to escape into Switzerland but were arrested by the frontier guards who had joined forces with the partisans.

At last Pavolini arrived in an armoured car from Como. How many men had he brought with him, Mussolini asked him. Pavolini hesitated. 'Well, tell me, How many?' 'Twelve.'

The last hope had gone. Dejectedly Mussolini allowed Birzer to arrange for him to join a German anti-aircraft unit of about 200 men, which was retreating north along the lakeside road towards Innsbruk. The remnants of the Italian convoy, led by Birzer, with Mussolini driving himself in an Alfa-Romeo and with Claretta Petacci and her brother, Marcello, bringing up the rear, moved off again behind the German trucks.

'Are there any partisans around here?' Mussolini called out to a man walking along beside the road. There were partisans everywhere, he replied. So[illegible] receiving this ominous [illegible]olini decided to abandon [illegible]eo and to get into Pavo[illegible]rmoured car. He was in the [illegible]ed car when the convoy was [illegible]y an outburst of fire. The 52nd [illegible]erici Garibaldi Brigade of [illegible]s had blocked the road.

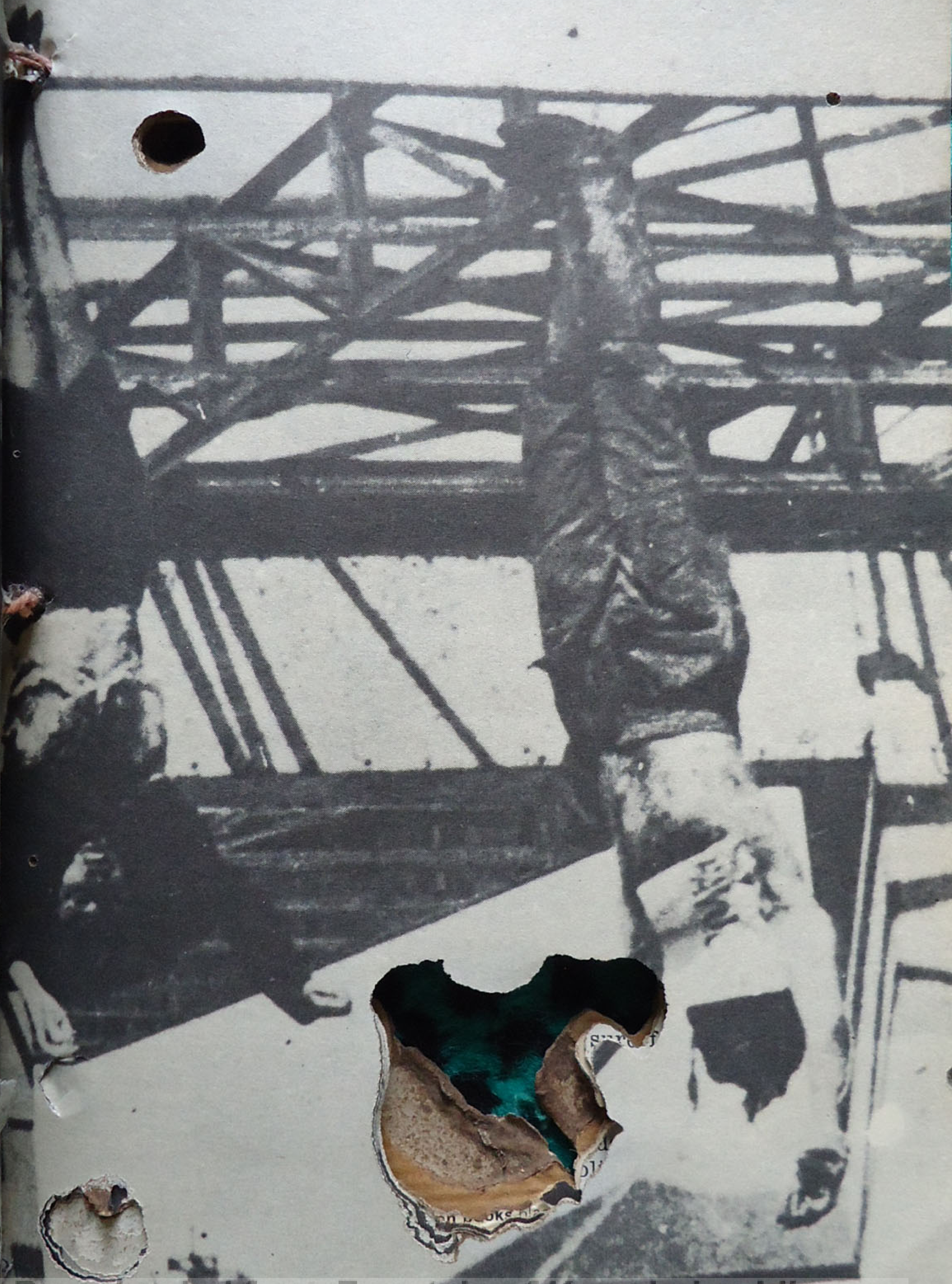
[illegible] partisans agreed to let the Ger[illegible]ns through, but declined to allow any Italians to go with them. So

GELORMINI
MUSSOLINI

The execution of Mussolini and some of his followers

ETACCI

PAVOLINI



The bodies of Mussolini and Claretta Petacci

Birzer suggested that Mussolini should put on a German overcoat and helmet and climb into one of the trucks. At first he declined to do so, unless those of his followers who still remained with him and Claretta Petacci were given the same protection; but by the time Birzer had left him and come back with a German truck he had been persuaded to change his mind. He put on the German coat and helmet and a pair of dark glasses, climbed into the truck and crouched down in the driver's cab. As he was driven away Claretta ran after him and tried to jump up onto the tailboard of one of the other trucks. Birzer had to use all his strength to drag her off.

The trucks were all searched in Dongo by the partisans, one of whom, Guiseppe Negri, a clog-maker, thought that he recognised Mussolini huddled up in the driver's cab, with a blanket over his shoulders. The German soldiers in the truck had explained, 'Kamerad drunk, Kamerad drunk.' But on sitting down beside him, pulling back the blanket and the upturned collar of the greatcoat, Negri had got a glimpse of that unmistakable face. He ran off to report the fact to his incredulous superior, Urbano Lazzaro, who came over to the truck and tapped the huddled figure on the shoulder. 'Kamerad!' he said. There was no reply. He tapped his shoulder again, this time addressing him, in what he described as a 'harsh, ironic ton [illegible] Your Excellency!' There [illegible] eply. Lazzaro, irritated [illegible] Cavaliere Benito Muss- [illegible] the figure gave a start, [illegible] bent down and removed the [illegible] revealing the massive skull. [illegible] urned down the collar of the [illegible], took off the sunglasses, [illegible] that it was Mussolini indeed. [illegible] o afterwards told the young partisan commander, Count Pier Luigi Bellini delle Stelle what happened next: 'The man who made the world tremble, whom I revered when I was young and whom I cursed when I was older, sits there huddled at my feet, pale, almost lifeless. He is holding a tommy-gun between his knees with the butt underneath his chin. I take it from him . . . I help him to rise. "Have you got any other arms?" I ask. He does not answer, but unbuttons his greatcoat, sticks his hand down between his belt and his trousers and pulls out a revolver . . . I put it into my pocket. We are now both standing up, facing each other. I feel I ought to say something, something which he is now expecting, head high and with an absent, unseeing look in his eyes. His face is waxen, and in that absent stare I see no fear, only utter weariness. Mussolini seems to me to be bereft of willpower, to be spiritually dead.'

It was decided that the prisoner would have to be removed from Dongo immediately in case an attempt was made to rescue him; so he was driven up to the frontier guards, barracks at Germasino. It was raining heavi[illegible] now and had grown much colder. Mussolini was asked if he would like to put on the German g[illegible]oat which he had taken off in the [illegible]or's office and thrown onto the floor. But he replied with a sudden flash of anger that the Germans had betrayed him three times now and he never wanted to see one of their uniforms again. In the car that took him up to Germasino he began to shiver feverishly.

In Dongo, the partisan leader, Count Bellini had found Claretta Petacci in a room at the Town Hall. 'I want to die with him,' she said. 'My life will mean

Sicilian villagers remove fascist slogans

N BRETAGNA·HA·FIN

nothing once he is dead. I would die anyway, but more slowly and with greater suffering. That is all I am asking, to die with him. You can't deny me that.'

'Please don't upset yourself like this,' Bellini said. 'I swear to you that I have no intention of shooting Mussolini. I have already told you what I am g[illegible]ng to do: hand him over to the au[illegible]es.'

At a me[illegible]ng of various members of the Committee of National Liberation for North Italy and of senior representatives of the Volunteer Freedom Corps in Milan, it had already been decided, however, that Mussolini should meet a different and more violent fate. And Walter Audisio, a tall, pale, former anti-Fascist volunteer in Spain, known as 'Colonel Valerio', had been ordered to leave for Dongo to ensure that Mussolini was not handed over to the authorities. He was met with strong resistance from the partisans in Dongo who did not want to lose their valuable prize; but he roughly brushed their objections aside and, having discovered where he had been taken, he and his companions, including a fellow-Communist, Michele Moretti, went off in search of him.

Mussolini had by then been moved from Germasino to a small farmhouse near Bonzanigo; and Claretta Pettaci had been allowed by Count Bellini to join him there. 'Their meeting was far from dramatic,' Count Bellini recalls. 'They merely exchanged a few hurried words, as if they had been strangers. "Good evening, Your Excellency." "Good evening, Signora." A pause. "Why have you followed me?" "Because I wanted to . . ."'

At about four o'clock in the afternoon of 28th April, 'Colonel Valerio', wearing a brown raincoat and a red, white and green scarf, burst into the bedroom of the Bonzanigo Farmhouse and announced to Mussolini and Claretta Petacci, 'Hurry up. I've come to rescue you.'

'Really!' Mussolini replied sardonically. 'Hurry up! Hurry up!' said Valerio, as he almost pushed them down the stairs and into the back of a waiting car. He jumped onto one of the mudguards while two of his companions stood on the running-board.

The car stopped at the gate of Villa Belmonte. 'Colonel Valerio' ordered the two passengers to get out and then 'pronounced a few words very qu[illegible]' as he levelled his machine g[illegible] The driver, Geminazza, [illegible] he was referring to some [illegible] received, but he was not sur[illegible] for 'everything happened [illegible]kly'.

[illegible]lini remained quite still and [illegible], but Claretta began jumping [illegible] down, throwing her arms round [illegible]lini and shouting, 'No! No! You [illegible]ustn't do it! You mustn't!'

In a voice which Geminazza des-

ur Übersetzstelle

cribed as being 'dry and nervous', 'Colonel Valerio' said, 'Let go of him, otherwise you'll get shot as well.'

Geminazza then heard a shot and Claretta fell to the ground without a sound. Mussolini faced the gun, holding back the lapels of his coat. 'Shoot [illegible] in the chest,' he said. They were the last words he spoke.

The two bodies were bundled back into the [illegible]nd driven to Azzano where the[illegible] were transferred to a removal van and thrown on top of the corpses of the fifteen Fascists who had been stopped at the road block at Musso and shot at Dongo.

In the early morning of 29th April the removal van stopped in front of a half-built petrol station in Piazzlae Loreto in Milan. The mud-splashed corpses of Mussolini and Claretta were tipped out and strung upside down from one of the girders.

Later Mussolini's body was cut down and given secret burial in the Musocco cemetery in Milan from where it was stolen the following year by neo-Fascists and handed to the Franciscan monastery of the Angelicum at Pavia. In 1957 it was given into the care of Donna Rachele who had it buried at Predappio under a tombstone on which was carved the emblem of the Fasces, symbol of his days of power.

Left: **Riddled with American bullets, a portrait of Mussolini**
Below: **Mussolini in his coffin**

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'One day' the young Mussolini assured his mother, 'I shall make the whole world tremble!' To this end Il Duce strove to emulate his vastly more successful ally. His achievement was to see his country capitulate after disastrous defeats, and himself to be executed by his own countrymen. The world trembled hardly at all.

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